

When Life Beats Us Down

~ 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Pastor Tom
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Katherine Arnold and Jay Wolf were both born in the Deep South (Georgia and Alabama, respectively) in the Spring of 1982. They grew up in wonderful families, both firstborns with LOTS of younger female siblings, learned the virtues of leading, listening and loving well, along with a few people-pleasing, Type A, and control-freak issues mixed in to keep them humble.

They both ended up at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, where they started off as great friends, but ended up in love and decided they wanted to make their life together...

In the fall of 2004—they were married in Athens, GA with 600 of their closest friends. And though at 22 years old they didn't fully grasp the reality of what they promised, they offered each other perhaps the sweetest words any human can offer another...for worse, for poorer, in sickness, till death.

They set their sights on adventures in California, 2,500 miles from home. She would pursue modeling, and he, law school at Pepperdine University. Jay didn't actually get his acceptance letter until they were driving their U-Haul through Texas. Impressive faith or youthful stupidity, either way, it worked out OK!

Early years in LA were full of making a life in one of the world's most vibrant cities, ironically, in a setting far from their Bible Belt roots they found a depth of Christian community and an ownership of their faith they had never experienced before through their church Bel Air Presbyterian.

In the final year of law school and years ahead of their schedule for having a baby—(especially for Type A, schedule making control freaks)—James Thompson Wolf was born on October 16, 2007. Life clicked along. They seemed destined to live out their dreams and succeed at everything they tried.

But on April 21, 2008, just 6 months after James' birth, Katherine collapsed in her kitchen while baby James slept in the other room. It happened during a 45 minute window while Jay was home before one of his final law school classes. Katherine had suffered a massive brain stem stroke out of the blue, from the rupturing of an AVM, an arteriovenous malformation. This is an abnormal tangle of blood vessels connecting arteries and veins. She didn't even know she had this rare congenital defect.

She was rushed to UCLA Medical Center and one of the world's best neurosurgeons, Dr. Nestor Gonzalez, "just happened" to be on call. It was the largest AVM he had ever seen, in the worst location. She was not expected to live, but despite the grim prognosis and the lawyer husband, he decided to take the case.

To save her life, over half of her cerebellum, the part of the brain that plays an important role in motor control, was removed and many vital intra-cranial nerves were sacrificed, possibly leaving her "locked in", paralyzed, or in a vegetative state. After 16 hours of micro-brain surgery, Katherine lived!

Katherine entered into a four month hospitalization of recovery, starting to relearn basic things. She could not walk, swallow, use the right side of her body or comb her hair. When stabilized, she was moved to a long-term rehabilitation facility. She spent over a year there. One of Jay's sisters moved to LA to take care of their little child while Jay walked with Katherine through the many painful and discouraging days of therapy.

She also faced more surgeries. Together, they faced the loss of many of their dreams. But they carried on learning much about God and His provision for them through this trying time. Their wedding vows were tested far beyond everything they ever dreamed possible.

But through all the hard parts of their story, God brought much good. Then, against all odds (but with approval from all her doctors), Katherine had a baby on June 26, 2015. They named him John Nestor Wolf. “John” which means “the Lord has been gracious” and Nestor—for her now three-time-life-saving neurosurgeon, Dr. Nestor Gonzalez.

I read their book *Hope Heals* before the COVID 19 outbreak. Sometimes I did not want to read it. I wondered if I could bear more bad news as each chapter unfolded. Yet when I read, I saw this growing sense of hope and transformation because of God’s presence in their lives. Perhaps most striking was that they eventually came to a place of acceptance of their situation. They had set out to live an epic All-American dream. But the stroke profoundly interrupted and changed the trajectory of their lives.

Now they speak, blog and host a camp for others who have been severely beaten down by some life difficulty. Katherine is also the face literally of the American Stoke foundation for her face reveals the obvious impact of a stroke. Yet they desire to spread the hope God has given them in the midst of this severe trial. You can explore their story further including a 22 minute documentary video at <https://www.hopeheals.com/story>

Now we all face various trials and challenges in our lives. Some of you have gone through life-altering changes that were way outside your plans. We all face everyday trials. If we’re Christians, we also face unique trials that come from keeping the faith. But sometimes life beats us down so much, that we may wonder if we will ever be able to get up again. We might wonder what God is doing when life beats us up.

Well I’m here to tell you today that it is possible to get back up when life beats us down because of God’s work in and through us. **When life beats us down, we can get back up because of God’s work in and through us.**

We will learn this from the next passage we will look at in Second Corinthians. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter in an attempt to reconcile misunderstandings and differences with the Corinthian congregation. Some prominent church members opposed Paul and his ministry. They believed that true leaders were above suffering & weakness. They also valued those had been educated in the schools of speaking or rhetoric. They also respected those who gave off a powerful presence. Paul met none of these criteria. He suffered. He wasn’t a trained speaker. He did not look powerful or imposing. Yet this did not disqualify him as an apostle nor did it mean God had abandoned him. Instead, Paul will show how his weakness, afflictions and trials strengthen his claim of God’s blessing on him. God would work in and through Paul’s sufferings. He does the same with you and me. Today, I want you to see four ways God works in us when life beats us down. I pray that these will encourage you to get back up today or whenever you experience a time where something beats you down in life.

So please find 2 Corinthians 4 in the New Testament. We will focus on verses 7 - 9. But I will read from the beginning of the chapter to give us some context.

2 Corinthians 4:1-18 (ESV)

⁴ Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ² But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For 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. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

¹³ Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, ¹⁴ knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵ For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Paul defends his ministry in the first 6 verses. He asserts that he and his ministry team renounce any questionable approaches to ministry. Instead they speak openly and commend themselves to people's consciences. Then he talks about the veiling or hiding of the gospel. Our enemy, Satan, does this by "blinding the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." He refers to this light in the verse just before our passage. Verse 6 – For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." So God has shone light into our hearts. Paul defines this light as "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

Then we come to verse 7. This gives us the first answer to the question **What is God doing in us when life beats us down? 1 – He's put His great treasure into us though we live in jars of clay.** Verse 7 – But we have this treasure in jars of clay. This phrase raises 2 questions. What is this treasure? What are jars of clay? The treasure could be the "ministry by the mercy of God" in verse 1. It could be the gospel of the glory

of Christ from verses 3 and 4. It could be Jesus Christ our Lord from verse 5. It could be “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” in verse 6. Or it could be, and I think this is the right answer, all of the above. I think Paul mentions all these in trying to describe the magnificence and glory of the gospel of Christ. When we grasp the extent, glory, beauty and majesty of God’s gospel it is beyond description.

Yet Paul tries and latches onto this image of light. We see it in verse 4 – the light of the gospel. Verse 6 – God shone in our hearts. Verse 6 – God shone to give the light of the knowledge of God’s glory in Jesus’ face. So when we receive the gospel, we receive the greatest gift we could ever receive. It is the supreme treasure that God gives to each one of us. Now an expensive treasure is usually stored in a strong, beautiful, treasure box or chest

But why this reference to jars of clay? The verse still works if he wrote “But we have this treasure to show the surpassing power belongs to God.” Well jars of clay were pretty common at that time. He may specifically refer to the clay oil lamps that people used to light their homes at night. They were cheap. They’re like our paper plates or cups. But they served a useful purpose.

Yet the weak, easily breakable, low cost image of the jars of clay gives Paul’s point great force. We are weak. We are easily breakable. We are all ordinary humans. Yet God chose to place His greatest treasure in us. The sufferings and afflictions we go through are part of the jars of clay existence. Yet through our sufferings, God shines His gospel light when we continue to trust him. That may be why we are so drawn to stories like that of Jay and Katherine. Through such brokenness, God’s light continued to shine and bring hope. That’s more powerful than a successful, famous or wealthy person telling us how by their own strength, hard work & brilliance, they accomplished all their success. We don’t see God’s gospel light and hope in that. We don’t see it as clearly there. But from jars of clay, we can’t help but look at the light. I’m going to explain the second half of verse 7 next week when we look at this passage again.

But let’s continue to move on looking for answers to our question. “What is God doing in us when life beats us down? Answer 2 is probably the most encouraging today. **2 – He helps us in the midst of our sufferings.** We have already seen this in the first verses of this letter. Remember chapter 1, verse 3-4. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort who comforts us in all our afflictions?” But now he goes into some detail about his sufferings and how God helps him in each one.

So verse 8. “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed.” So there’s that afflicted word again from chapter 1. Affliction recalls bitter life experiences. Most likely it describes trials and persecutions he experienced in ministry. He will get into more and more detail about this as the letter progresses. In fact, this is the first of four hardship lists in 2nd Corinthians. So he and his team are afflicted in every way. But they are not crushed. But what kind of crushed. When I think of crushed, I think of a pop can that gets run over by a semi-trailer truck. Life can sometimes feel like that. But the word means to confine or restrict to a narrow space. We may even use the word crushed to describe a situation like this; “I was crushed on that bus coming home because it was so full of people.” But here he’s talking about how afflictions and troubles can pile up

so much that you feel you can't breathe or have no way out. Yet, he never got to the point where he was completely cut off or confined. God always made a way out for him. **Though afflicted, God provides a way out for us.** Think about the tight spots in your life sometime in the past. God rescued you from being restricted or confined so you could keep going.

A few days after Katherine's 16 hour surgery, her husband Jay sat beside her hospital bed. He took a Bible from her bedside cupboard. He flipped to Job and found Job's suffering so similar to theirs. He writes "This most ancient of biblical texts felt so strikingly modern, so relevant to Katherine's story that I was stunned. I considered the reality that suffering sometimes comes because of the decisions we make; sometimes as a way for God to gauge his place in our hearts; and sometimes simply as a by-product of living in a fallen world. Yet no matter the origin of the suffering, God's presence remains the same. He finds us in our hurts, if we want to be found. His power to filter the worst that life has to offer, with goodness remaining is our great hope."¹ Though afflicted, we need not be crushed because God find us in our hurts. He joins us in our tight spots to lead us to a way out.

Next he says "**we are perplexed but not driven to despair.**" When perplexed God provides strength and hope. To be perplexed or baffled means you don't know what to do. The troubles mount or some major difficulty arrives and you're at a loss. This is a state of mental confusion or uncertainty about something. Paul experienced that, but also claims God prevented him from going to the point of absolute despair. Maybe you have experienced something like that, where you didn't understand or know what to do. Yet God comforted you in some way to protect you from total despair.

7 months after Katherine's stroke she was in a radiology lab to take her 9th swallowing test. They looked forward to celebrating Thanksgiving the next day. She desperately prayed that God would allow her to swallow so she could actually participate in some small way with the Thanksgiving feast. Her swallowing therapist fed her a spoonful of pudding. She tried to swallow with all of her strength quite sure that Thanksgiving would be the perfectly timed moment for God to allow her to eat again. But her therapist shook her head no.

So Katherine wiped away tears of sadness, embarrassment, anger and exhaustion. The next day, her husband took her to the place where their family would celebrate thanksgiving. Katherine could only sit back and observe. She writes "Despair washed over me as I watched Jay and his sisters playing with our son James, lifting him in the air and running around with him in circles – while I could barely even hold my head up because my neck wasn't strong enough yet.

I found myself wondering, 'Has God made a mistake? Should I have died? I'm caught between life and death. I can't even walk or eat or play with my child. I've gone from making lasagna in my kitchen to being fed all meals through a tube in my stomach. I've gone from going on playdates with girlfriends to attending courses on disability adjustment. I used to powerwalk the hills of Pepperdine. Now I have two physical therapists and a walker while I agonize to walk one step. I've gone from wearing a cute outfit every day to

¹ Katherine and Jay Wolf, *Hope Heals*, Zondervan, 2016, 72.

wearing adult diapers and hospital gowns. I want my old life back! . . . If I weren't here anymore, things would be better for everyone.”² She sat there perplexed – profoundly perplexed bordering on total despair.

But then something happened. She writes “Before those thoughts had even fully landed in my head and heart, I felt a deep awakening of the Word of God, which I had known since I was a little girl. I could almost hear this rapid fire succession of the truths of Scripture like a dispatch from God Himself.

‘Katherine, you are not a mistake. I DON’T MAKE MISTAKES. I’m God, and you’re not. Remember that you were fearfully and wonderfully made in your mother’s womb, and that is when the AVM formed in your brain.

There is purpose in all of this. Just wait. You’ll see. There is no replacing you! . . . Trust Me. I am working out EVERYTHING for your good. Don’t doubt this truth just because you are in darkness now. What’s true in the light is true in the dark.

When we are perplexed, it is tempting to despair. But in those moments we must turn to God and His promises. When perplexed, God provides hope and strength.

Paul also says “**we are persecuted but not forsaken.**” When persecuted, God does not abandon us. Here again Paul acknowledges the depth of the trial. To be persecuted means to be harassed, pursued or tormented. He has experienced this through his ministry. Yet he celebrates that God has not abandoned him. The Lord comes through for His people consistently when they face difficult challenges. God encouraged Joshua prior to entering the Promised Land with the words “Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you.” These words are quoted in Hebrews 13:5 as an encouragement to distance oneself from the love of money. We don’t have to love money and pursue more because God will never leave or forsake us. God promises to never forsake His suffering people except one. On the cross, Jesus cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus experienced this kind of abandonment so we would never have to experience such total forsakenness.

The final description of affliction that Paul provides here goes like this – **we are struck down but not destroyed.** When struck down – God will not allow us to be destroyed. The first phrase carries the idea of being thrown down to the ground. To hit them with enough force that you knocked them down. Paul seems to say that his opponents are powerful. They can knock him down. It seems Paul experienced getting physically knocked down more than once. But they were not able to destroy him or terminate him.

Paul still lived and wrote this letter. Though Paul would ultimately be executed for his faith, he would not be perish like a lost person. He would not experience the destruction awaiting those who reject God all their lives. The Lord had been faithful to save him out of the threats to his life. Paul was confident such deliverance would continue.

So in just three verses, we have seen the reality that life can beat us down. But Paul could get up because of God’s work in and through him. There are several more examples of this through the rest of this passage which we will pick up next week.

² Ibid., 163-164.

But for today, you may think that you're not much more than an ordinary jar of clay. Yet God has placed His great treasure in you to shine to others so they might have hope. You may be going through affliction, perplexity, persecution or life has knocked you down. But God rescues His people from tight spots so they are not crushed. God is present with His perplexed people so they are not driven to despair. God will not abandon His persecuted people. God will ensure that even those struck down will not experience final destruction. Instead He has the power to bring good out of all our troubles.

One great question that we need to ask when going through trouble concerns the location of our hope. In what or whom do you place your hope? As Christians we might immediately say God or Christ. But when trouble comes, it really tests this claim. We might find that our hope is not primarily in God but in a desired outcome. So what do we hope for in the midst of this pandemic – that we can get back to normal life. That is putting our hope in an outcome. But what if normal life never returns. Are we then without hope?

I'll give the final word today to the husband in the Hope Heals story. Eventually, Katherine got to a place where she could live semi independently in their new home. When they arrived there about 2 years after the stroke, they expected ceaseless joy and celebration. Jay writes "Though we were now finally out of therapy, it seemed that the real, long term work was just beginning. Katherine would require eye surgeries to protect the right eye compromised by its paralyzed lid and to hopefully correct her double vision. We were battling with insurance companies and hospitals facing tens of thousands of dollars in contested bills. We were denied home care to allow Katherine to continue therapy at home.

These were not the normal concerns of your typical 28 year old couple and we felt alone in them. We found ourselves asking, *Is this what we hoped for during all those months away, all those months aching for home?* We became increasingly aware that when it seems you've gotten everything you hoped for and yet are left longing, perhaps those hoped for things weren't the truest hope. If hope is only rooted in an outcome, then your expectations will crush you. So what was our truest home? What was our truest hope? Who was the only one who could be the truest fulfillment of our desires?"³ God alone; The one who gave us His great treasure in jars of clay; The one who walks with us through every affliction and is accomplishing His good purposes through them. Let us come to Him to redirect our hope to Him.

³ Ibid. 197.

Outline

Big Idea - When life beats us down, we can get back up because of God's work, in and through us.

What is God doing when life beats us up?

1 – He put His great treasure into us though we live in jars of clay. (4:7)

2 – He helps us in the midst of all our sufferings. (4:8-9)

- When afflicted, He provides a way out.
- When perplexed, God provides hope and strength.
- When persecuted, God will not abandon us.
- When struck down, God will not allow us to be destroyed.