

## **2 Corinthians 4: 1, 6-10**

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. <sup>6</sup>For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shown in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup>But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. <sup>8</sup>We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

### **Cracked Pots and Shattered Crystal September 10, 2017**

One Thanksgiving as we were preparing to entertain family and friends, we had gotten out all our crystal wine glasses. These were glasses we received as wedding gifts, I think. After cleaning and drying them Anna had put them on the dining room table in preparation for the day. At that time in our lives, we had a cat named Grace, who decided she would investigate said glasses. When we discovered her on the table, she immediately bolted across the table, and like a lucky bowler hoping for a strike, sent most of those glasses flying! I think we ended up with two unbroken glasses. It's a good thing Anna loved that cat, and that her name was Grace!

Like many of you, we have lots of dishes at our house. We have every-day dishes that get a lot of use and we have fine china and crystal that come out when company comes over. Some of our dishes have been handed down from family and in some ways, are priceless, in that sentimental way that things are priceless. And sometimes when you have children, or clumsy husbands, or inquisitive cats, those precious things get broken. And when they do, out comes the Elmer's glue and you desperately hope you can put them back together again. Often, however, you just can't put Humpty back together again, and the best you can do is assemble it in ways that at least you can still look at it or display it in the china cabinet. This is not possible with crystal wine glasses by the way.

Today I am celebrating my 64<sup>th</sup> birthday and my 5<sup>th</sup> year in pastoral ministry. And as I get older, I can't help but think about aging and brokenness, the brokenness of body, mind, and spirit, things that seem to happen to us on a weekly basis as we age. That Beatle's song keeps running through my mind; you may recall the lyrics.

*When I get older losing my hair,  
Many years from now.  
Will you still be sending me a Valentine  
Birthday greetings bottle of wine.*

*If I'd been out till quarter to three  
Would you lock the door,  
Will you still need me, will you still feed me,  
When I'm sixty-four*

Well here I am, and it seems to have worked out pretty well so far. But Paul's words remind me that God works through people like all of us, and often, like clay pots or fine china dishes, we are fragile and not only break easily, but can be cracked and may not even know it. That God works through our brokenness and for that we should rejoice and not lose hope. Today I want to share a couple of stories and since it is my birthday, I take special privilege. It's my party and I can cry if I want to!

Stephen Bedard is a writer, speaker, teacher, and blogger. He is the director of Hope's Reason, an adjunct instructor at Emmanuel Bible College, and a chaplain in the Army Reserve. He lives in Cambridge, Ontario, with his wife and five children. Stephen shared this beautiful story called *Strength in Weakness* where he says,

“When my wife and I got married, we were excited about all the possibilities for the future. As I walked down the aisle, I was already looking ten years into the future, excited about our children, our perfect family. Before long, however, reality overturned our dreams. Our first child died in a miscarriage. We had five beautiful children after that, but two of them were diagnosed with severe autism. We asked all the “why?” questions. Why would God do this to our family? I was filled with grief over the broken dreams. My autistic children would never drive, never go to college, and never get married and have children.

I won't lie—my wife and I have been through some very difficult days. Raising children with autism is exhausting, both physically and emotionally. My son and daughter ended up in group homes, something I never expected. Has our family been abandoned by God? Absolutely not. We have been blessed with little miracles that parents of typical children could easily overlook. We rejoiced the first time our children played together. We celebrated the first time our autistic son said, “I love you.” Things like successful toilet training, which some autistic children never master, are exciting events for us. We have learned much as parents about God's grace.

Nothing our children can do will make us love them more. Our love for them is just as strong as our love for our non-autistic children. Our experience with our children gives us a sense of how God sees us. We cannot earn God's love, and yet God pours out lavish grace upon us. Even in the darkest moments, God is present and at work to strengthen us. Our brokenness is not always repaired, but God's glory shines through the cracks.”

God's glory shines through the cracks! I love that, don't you? It reminds me of the Japanese art of Kintsugi, where broken pottery is mended with gold making the brokenness not only beautiful but clear for all to see. One of the bloggers I read this week shared that in Old Testament days, a clay vessel became impure if something unholy or unclean came in contact with it. The only way it could be made pure again was to break it. Then it could be glued back together for service. Of course, the cracks and chips would most certainly still show, especially when held up to the light. And isn't that how we should be in the world. Broken pots or cracked pots, (or crack pots!), in whom the light of God shines through? That in our broken lives, love is the glue that holds it all together? That when you want to start singing, “*Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64 or 74 or 84 or 94?*” that God's answer is always, “Yes!”

I want to close today with a wonderful Chinese Folktale shared by authors Amy Friedman and Meredith Johnson. It goes like this:

“Once upon a time a woman named Chang Chang worked for a merchant in Sichuan province. The merchant's home was high atop a hill, and Chang Chang worked as the merchant's laundress. Every day she had to walk down the hill to collect water from the stream. When she was young, Chang Chang made two pots to carry her water, and these she hung upon a pole she could carry over her shoulders. She painted one pot blue and the other red, and on each pot, she painted flowers. Chang Chang loved flowers. And she loved her pots.

For some years she carried her pole down the hillside and collected water. Afterward, she climbed the hill. She was strong and able, though she was growing older. And as time passed, the pots, too, grew old. One day, as Chang Chang prepared to place the pole over her shoulders, she noticed the blue pot had a slender crack along its side. She ran a finger over the crack and sighed, “My poor little pot.”

For a few moments, Chang Chang studied the crack. “Will you hold my water?” she whispered. But she decided she could still use the pot. As always, she carried both pots down the hill and filled them with water to the very

brim. By the time she reached the hilltop, the pot with a crack was half-empty, but this still left her plenty of water for doing the laundry.

For the next two years, Chang Chang carried those pots down the hillside every morning. When she reached the stream, she filled them to the brim, and afterward, she walked back up the hill, balancing the pole across her shoulders. By the time she reached the house, the cracked blue pot was only half full -- just enough for the laundry.

Each day Chang Chang examined the crack, and though it was growing a little longer, she decided all was well. What she didn't notice was that the poor blue pot was miserable. Each time it drank from the stream, it secretly hoped that this day all the water would stay inside its belly, but each day when they reached the top of the hill, the pot knew it had failed. The blue pot glanced at the red pot and saw water filled to the top, and the blue pot began to feel desolate.

In its resting place on the far side of Chang Chang's little hut, the blue pot worried and wept. "I'm no good, I'm no good, I'm no good!" the blue pot wailed. "Stop your whining," the red pot answered. "No one wants to hear from a pot." One day the blue pot woke and felt its crack beginning to expand. It was certain Chang Chang would soon decide to throw it away. Soon it would be no use to anyone for anything. That morning, as Chang Chang climbed the hill, she was startled to hear a voice she had never heard. "Chang Chang," the voice said, "throw me away. I'm no good for anyone or anything." Chang Chang stopped and looked around, wondering who could be speaking to her. "Hello?" she called down the hill.

But the voice that answered was very near. "I'm right here," said the blue pot, swinging this way and that to get Chang Chang's attention. "I'm your pot. The pot you made with your own two hands. The pot that has served you so well all these years. But I see now my time is finished. The crack in my side has made me useless. When you carry me up the hill, I spill all my water. I'm no good!" For a long moment, Chang Chang stood very still, amazed that her pot had spoken. "Is that you?" she whispered, looking close. "Are you speaking, dear pot?" "It is I!" the pot said. "I am so sorry I have failed you, but I have."

Chang Chang was overjoyed to know her pots were as full of life as she had always imagined, but she was sad to hear such sorrowful words. "But pot, you don't understand," she said. "You haven't been paying attention. Look around." Chang Chang pointed to the path beside them, the path up the hill, and for the first time, the pot stopped looking inward and instead looked out. On the right side of the hill, the pot noticed beautiful flowers growing in abundance -- poppies and peonies and chrysanthemum and narcissus and citron. A ribbon of color edged the path.

"And look at the other side of the hill," Chang Chang said. The pot glanced to the other side and saw it was bare. "I've always known about your flaw," Chang Chang said. "And so, I planted seeds on your side of the path, and every day you water them and add more beauty to the world." The blue pot was overjoyed. All its sadness was gone. It understood, just as Chang Chang always had, that every being has its unique flaws. And it is our little quirks and faults that make us and the world so interesting."

The Apostle Paul wrote to the early church in Corinth that God made His light to shine in our hearts. That he would put that treasure, in these jars of clay. Jars that are broken and chipped, cracked by the hurts and concerns, the failures and disappointments, the sins and shortcomings of our lives. We wonder, perhaps, if God would even want to use us with all our flaws. Yet this is where God - **the Creator of the Universe** - has decided to dwell! Cracks, and all. And through those cracks, God's love leaks out into our homes, our community, our world, where seeds have been planted and where flowers will grow. Thanks be to God! Amen.