

God's Power Through Earthen Vessels
2 Corinthians 4:7-18
Northwest Community Church, May 29, 2016, Todd Havekost

Introduction

I have something I would like to show you as we begin his morning ... let me set this money here on top of the podium ... aren't these plastic bags great? When I was young they used paper bags for groceries, their shape was rigid, they tore easily, you could only carry one under each arm, and they didn't have these loops you can place over your fingers. Don't you think these plastic bags are amazing?

You don't seem very interested in this plastic bag. You seem far more interested in the money on top of the podium. The theme verse of our passage this morning, 2 Corinthians 4:7, speaks of a "treasure in earthen vessels" and why God has designed things that way. I tried to make the plastic bag the focus of your attention, but that was futile because you were focused on the cash, on the treasure inside the common container. 2 Corinthians 4 calls us to also be focused on the treasure of God's power that dwells within the life of each of His children.

2 Corinthians 4:7

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves (4:7).

We pick up the context from verse 6. **For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (4:6).**

The same God who spoke light into existence at creation makes the light of His glory and His presence shine in the heart of every believer. So "this treasure" in verse 7 speaks of the indwelling presence of God. We have this treasure "in earthen vessels", clay pots, common containers. Containers are meant to hold something. We as believers are home to the indwelling presence of the awesome God, the creator of the universe.

Why is there such a tremendous disparity between the commonness of the vessel and the glory of the treasure contained within? Verse 7 tells us, "so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not ourselves." This is not a mistake; it is not an accident. It is an essential aspect of God's design, His express purpose. God manifests His all-surpassing power through ordinary people like you and me when we depend on Him so that it is apparent to all that He is responsible for what is accomplished.

This truth is highlighted repeatedly throughout Scripture, which suggests that it is particularly "near and dear" to God's heart and how He operates. So many Bible stories demonstrate this that I had a difficult time selecting just one.

- It is clearly seen in the Exodus and God's deliverance of His people from Pharaoh through the ten plagues and culminating when He parted the Red Sea (Ex. 14).
- Numbers 13 & 14 tell the disheartening account of when the Jews chose to be persuaded by the negative report of the ten spies rather than the one from Joshua and Caleb, and failed to trust God to give them the Promised Land.
 - It was called "the Promised Land" for a reason, because God had repeatedly promised to give it to His people.
 - This failure to trust God to demonstrate His power prevented an entire generation from ever entering that land and experiencing the abundant life God intended for them.

- God's purpose to show His power through his people is highlighted in the story of God delivering His people from the Ammonites and Moabites in the time of Jehoshaphat when they began singing praise songs (2 Chr. 20:20-21).
- It is prominent in the transformation of Peter from a head-strong disciple who denied Jesus to an apostle who preached in the power of the Spirit and through whom God worked miracles (Acts 2-4).
- And it is apparent in God's selection of Paul, who was by all accounts a lousy public speaker (2 Cor. 10:10) to be the person He assigned to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7), "so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men but on the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:5).

Let's turn our attention to an event in Judges 7 that demonstrates without a doubt how committed God is to showing His power in and through us.

Judges 7

As the chapter begins, God is preparing to deliver His people from their Midianite oppressors, and there are 32,000 Israelite soldiers available to Gideon.

The Lord said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying 'my own power has delivered me'" (7:2).

God says "there are too many soldiers here, a victory will be attributed to the size of the army." God wants to work in ways that ensure it is apparent to all that His power is achieving great victories. So verse 3 tells us by sending away all the fearful soldiers the army was reduced from 32,000 to 10,000.

But God is still not satisfied as He indicates in verse 4, "**the people are still too many; bring them down to the water and I will test them for you there**" (7:4a).

So God introduces an arbitrary selection criterion to further reduce their numbers. Most of the men knelt to drink. The army was reduced to the 300 men who lapped the water with their hands (7:5-7). Now that was a group God was prepared to work with.

When we come to verse 12 we find this army of 300 arrayed against opponents "as numerous as locusts." We learn God's plan in verse 16.

[Gideon] divided the 300 men into three companies, and he put trumpets and empty pitchers into the hands of all of them, with torches inside the pitchers (7:16).

Interesting, "torches inside empty pitchers" sounds a lot like 2 Corinthians 4 with earthen vessels housing the treasure of the light of the knowledge of God.

When the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers, they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing, and cried, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" (7:20).

We read in verse 22, **the Lord set of the sword of one against another even throughout the whole [Midianite] army**, creating confusion among the enemy soldiers so that they killed one another. And thus the Lord's army (of 300) won the battle against the Midianite army that was "as numerous as locusts."

Let's consider a dialog we here at Northwest might have at God. "Imagine what impact we could have for You if we had 32,000 people attending Northwest on Sunday mornings." He might respond, "if that was the case people would attribute the impact to your numbers, not to My power."

“OK, I can see that, well then let’s cut that number down, imagine what impact Northwest could have for your Kingdom if we had 10,000 attending here.” He might say, “if that was the case your impact would still be attributed to your size.”

“Well God, I guess there’s not much a group of 300 people could do.” He might respond, “that’s right, no one would expect much from a group of 300 people, that’s just how I like to work, so that when I accomplish great things through a group like that everyone will know that they are witnessing the surpassing greatness of My power at work.”

At Northwest

In this context, two currently ongoing stories at Northwest take on special significance.

Story 1: God raised up Manuel and Susan Abarca to have a heart and vision to establish a Spanish speaking ministry. God led the Abarca family from Minnesota to partner with the Evangelical Free Church in San Antonio. Initially Manuel was partnering with Vista Community Church, but this ministry needed a church with an existing facility and Vista is still in the process of acquiring that.

So God brought Manuel to Northwest, and we immediately developed a tremendous connection and partnership with him. And now God is demonstrating the surpassing greatness of His power raising up the Encuentro ministry here, through a church that is small and ordinary from a human perspective, but through which God can do extraordinary things far out of proportion to its size and human resources.

Story 2: God turned an initial investment of \$40,000 in two adjacent acres into the funds to purchase twelve acres immediately behind us more than ten years ago. After recognizing that we were getting minimal use of the land and considering its sale, God brought developers to our door proposing to leverage state tax credits for affordable housing projects. This resulted in a contract that enables us to retain the two adjacent acres we really wanted and could potentially use in the future, and to sell the remaining ten acres we would likely never need anyway for 2.5 million dollars.

We recognize that the purchase remains contingent on state approval of the tax credits. But if God wants this sale to close to demonstrate the surpassing greatness of His power, unleashing \$2.5M of funding for His kingdom work through a “small, ordinary” church, we know He can make that happen. Do you want to be a part of the group that is calling out to Him to bring this sale to completion?

Both of these stories represent extremely exciting kingdom advances in their own right. But when considered in the context of Judges 7 and 2 Corinthians 4 they take on even greater significance. They demonstrate God creating God-sized impact through a church far disproportionate to its size, impact that unmistakably demonstrates the surpassing greatness of His power.

Prayer and Promptings

Whether corporately as a church or personally in our daily lives, the primary way we express we are depending on God’s power is through prayer. One direction our prayer may often take is asking God to bless the people He has placed in our lives, and to use us to be His instruments of blessing to them. This may involve impact in the lives of family members or friends, effectiveness and faithfulness in the workplace or in school, preparing for teaching or other ministry opportunities, or being a faithful witness for Jesus in our world.

One way in which God can show His power, one outcome of those prayers can be God equipping and preparing us by bringing to mind

- Probing questions to ask our friends or family members
- Ideas on how to speak words of life to them or to help them in some other way
- Insights into God's truths and how to better communicate them
- Recognizing open doors in people's hearts and how to proceed.

I can't tell you how many times I have found myself frustrated or stymied in some relationship or some endeavor, and when I finally realized I had neglected to pray about it and began to do so, God prompted me by bringing to mind some type of breakthrough.

Personally, the most frequent way I experience God's answers to prayer is through His promptings. I always have a pen and paper nearby when I pray because invariably He will bring ideas to mind that I write down to act on later. When we ask God to use us as His instrument in the lives of others, He will often show His power by equipping us through His promptings to be a blessing as we depend on Him.

Prayer is the primary way we express we are depending on God's power. When I choose to invest all my time in doing to the exclusion of praying, I am demonstrating that I am relying on my abilities, my efforts, the resources at my disposal to achieve my goals and my purposes, the things that are important to me. When I pray, I am living out the truth that God's power is what really matters, that I am relying on Him to bring to pass the things of greatest importance.

More happens when I pray than when I do. Doing is necessary, but doing in the absence of God's power is ineffective for kingdom impact. Jesus said "apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Ecclesiastes would describe doing without praying as "vanity." Doing that takes place upon the foundation of dependent prayer results in changed hearts and transformed minds and gospel impact.

One our church's six core values states that we value, not what we can accomplish by our own activities, but the life-transforming, heart-changing, world-impacting things that only God can do, the kinds of things He does when we trust Him and when we ask Him.

To be sure, we pray as humble servants coming to an all-wise King, acknowledging that our requests may not be aligned with God's purposes or timing, as was expressed so wonderfully by Daniel's three friends in chapter 3. We come with faith that God can answer our prayer, and if He does not, we take great encouragement that He has an even better plan.

To the degree we put our confidence, not in our abilities and efforts, but in God's transforming power, a dependence tangibly expressed when we consider our calling on God through prayer to be an element of preeminent importance in our daily lives, to that degree God can mightily use us as individuals and as a church for His kingdom purposes.

Responding to Adversity

We pray and are prepared to respond to God's promptings equipping us to be His instruments of blessing. We pray because we know that only He has the power to accomplish the things that really matter. And we pray because we especially need to draw near to God when facing adversity.

When the nation of Israel was wandering in the wilderness, how did they react when faced with adversity? Time and time again, it was "let's go back to Egypt, things weren't so bad there." Their instinctive reaction was to want to retreat to the familiar and the comfortable, rather than trusting God in the latest faith-stretching situation. In fact, this was so frequently repeated it became almost pathetically predictable.

When you or I or our family members or close friends encounter a crisis, or we are shouldering responsibilities that feel overwhelming, or we are facing adversity with no end in sight, we also can be sorely tempted to shrink back from the life of faith into the familiar and comfortable. I suggest that like the Israelites in the wilderness, you and I also have our “tried and true” responses when times are tough, responses that may be just as repetitive and predictable.

We may react with anxiety or worry, by doubling down on effort, with anger (blaming others), with shame (blame turned inward), or by relying on competence and expertise (“I can do this”). Scripture repeatedly teaches us that God wants to use adversity in our lives to build character, to transform us, and that will only happen when our response to adversity is to draw near to Him, to deepen our dependence on Him, trusting Him to work through that situation for His glory and our growth.

2 Corinthians 4:8-9

Returning to 2 Corinthians 4, we get a picture of what life can be like when we maintain that perspective of responding to life’s adversity by drawing near to Him. For earthen vessels living in a broken world and engaged in God’s kingdom work, who have the surpassing greatness of God’s power dwelling within, life is at the same time (1) filled with adversity and (2) overwhelmingly rewarding. In verses 8 through 15 Paul answers the question “why is it hard?”, and then in verses 16 through 18 “why is it so worth it?”.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed (4:8a).

Living and serving in a fallen and broken world, ruined by sin, means that we will inevitably encounter often overwhelming adversity, that manifests itself in all kinds of forms. It may be intense suffering from disease or injury, or relational heartbreak in our families or with close friends. Or as we have just studied in Daniel, it may be conflicts and hardships that are part and parcel of living in Babylon.

Yet despite affliction that may strike us on multiple fronts and with great intensity, we are not crushed. Affliction does not have to cause us to give up believing in the goodness of God. One of the greatest ways God is glorified in the lives of His children is when we continue to hold fast to faith in His goodness and His purposes and His eternal plan “no matter what.” We see in the Beatitudes and elsewhere that some of God’s greatest promises of blessing and reward in the next life are to those who faithfully endure intense suffering in this one.

Perplexed, but not despairing (4:8b).

Affliction often leaves us asking “why?” questions that do not have easy answers.

- Why would you allow this tragedy to happen to me or my loved ones?
- Why has this disease continued for years with no relief in sight?
- Why is my relationship with this family member or dear friend so estranged or have such an apparently insurmountable amount of baggage?
- Why does it appear my most fervently desired dreams will not be fulfilled?

Though we frequently cannot understand what God’s purposes could be for the adversity we are experiencing, despite unanswered questions and profound confusion, we do not despair, we do not lose hope.

Confusion does not have to cause us to give up hope, to lose sight of the fact that God is weaving everything that happens in all of our lives into His infinitely wise bigger “story.” Sometimes in hindsight we get a glimpse of how He worked through our adversity to bring about His wonderful purposes. In other cases, we may not understand the profound wisdom of His “story” until we look back from heaven with a perspective informed by eternity.

Persecuted, but not forsaken (4:9a).

Paul experienced repeated occurrences of persecution that took many forms, including physical attacks, being forced to leave where he was staying, and intense opposition (as cataloged in detail in 2 Cor. 11:23-27). And we are painfully aware that many of our brothers and sisters around the world today also face various forms of intense, life-threatening, or even life-taking persecution. You may have experienced opposition of various kinds as you lovingly identify yourself as a follower of Jesus. And as we have studied in Daniel, we can expect more of that in the days ahead as our culture takes on more of the values of Babylon.

Though we may be ostracized and deserted by men, we are not forsaken, we recognize we are never alone. God's never-ending, personal, grace-filled presence is always with us.

Struck down, but not destroyed (4:9b).

The cumulative effect of adversity, of confusion, and of persecution can knock us off our feet. But though we may be reeling and thrown for a loop, we are not destroyed, that never represents the end of the story. This brings to mind the picture of a child's inflatable toy with a weight in the bottom. The realization that God's power and purposes are at work through us is that stabilizing foundation at the base of our lives. Though we are knocked over, we will not stay down, but will bounce back up. Just as

- Affliction does not have to cause us to give up believing in the goodness of God, and
- Confusion does not have to cause us to give up hope, and
- Persecution does not have to cause us to lose sight of God's abiding presence with us,
- Being struck down does not have to cause us to give up, to lose sight that God's purposes can never be defeated in our lives. He is never finished working in and through us.

In each of these four pairs of expressions in verses 8 and 9, we see the importance of perspective, not losing sight of God's goodness, God's story, God's presence, and God's undefeatable purposes in our lives. These are the situations, when we are afflicted and perplexed and persecuted and knocked off our feet, where God can most powerfully demonstrate His great power. These are the times that call us to desperate dependence on Him, as we recognize that our only hope is His coming through for us.

2 Corinthians 4:10-12

Verse 10 tells us why it is so important that we live out that dependence. **Always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body (4:10).**

Think of how God could have communicated His message. He could have used a 100-mile wide High Definition TV screen in the sky to broadcast His message with great clarity. But instead, God has chosen through the ages not to overpower, but to woo. He has chosen to present His message and win people over through the sacrificial love of His servants as we "carry about in the body the dying of Jesus."

And what is the purpose of this suffering? "So that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." When we are living object lessons of the love of Jesus, demonstrating the reality of His love through our lives, others will come to know our Savior who gave His life for them.

Of course exhibit #1 of this for all the ages was Jesus, who "emptied Himself" (Phil. 2:7) of God-power and loved us all the way to the cross. Witnessing His forgiving love for others even while enduring the crucifixion, the centurion concluded "truly this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39). Michael Card expressed this powerfully in one of his songs, "why did they nail his feet and hands, when His love would have held Him there?"¹

¹ Michael Card, "Why?", Joy in the Journey, 1994.

God's strategy of sending forth His message through living object lessons of sacrificial love, demonstrating His power through ordinary people, continued without interruption after Jesus.

- In Acts 4, for healing a lame man and attributing it to the power of Jesus, Peter and John were thrown in jail, but they said no matter the cost they had to keep preaching Jesus.
- In Acts 7, for calling the Jewish leaders to repent of having put Jesus to death, Stephen was martyred, but even as he was dying he asked God to forgive his killers.
- That immediately (in Acts 8) triggered persecution for all Christians in Jerusalem, who though under duress as they were scattered to Judea and Samaria continued to preach the gospel of Jesus.

And it continues to this day.

For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh (4:11).

As we carry in our bodies the dying of Jesus, taking His message to others despite opposition and hardship, living out His sacrificial love, the life of Jesus is made known through us. People hear His message, it becomes real to them, and they believe in the Savior.

So death works in us, but life in you (4:12).

Paul's willingness to endure hardship for Jesus resulted in the gospel coming to the Corinthians. It resulted in life for them.

Think back over Paul's ministry. Within weeks after his conversion, the Jews were planning to kill him. He could have quit at that point, "this is too dangerous, I will be a full-time tent maker instead," but he went on.

He had already experienced opposition at many churches but kept going to Philippi, where he and Silas were unjustly beaten and thrown into the town jail. When an earthquake opened the door of the jail, they could have pursued legitimate freedom, but instead they stuck around and shared the gospel with the jailer with the result that he and his entire household came to faith in Jesus.

Later when unjustly imprisoned in Rome, Paul continued to share the gospel with the palace guard, and wrote the New Testament books of Philippians, Ephesians and Colossians. Paul's entire ministry took place because he was willing to have "death work in him," as he allowed God's surpassing power to work through him and bring life and blessing to countless people.

When we take God's message to others despite enduring opposition and hardship, the love of Jesus becomes real to them and they experience the "life" Jesus offers.

2 Corinthians 4:13-15

But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed, therefore I spoke", we also believe, therefore we also speak (4:13).

Because we believe the gospel, that everyone who believes in Jesus has eternal life, and everyone who does not is lost for eternity, we can't help but speak of it. No matter how people respond or what opposition arises, we speak.

Knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you (4:14).

We told you and we tell others about eternal life in Jesus because we know that we and everyone who believes will be resurrected to that life.

For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God (4:15).

All the “dying”, all the affliction we have encountered telling you and others about Jesus is worth it, because more people are experiencing the amazing grace of God in Jesus, and having received that eternal life are giving thanks to God.

2 Corinthians 4:16

Having spoken in verses 8 through 15 of the adversity that often accompanies faithfully serving Jesus, Paul now turns in verses 16 through 18 to why serving God is overwhelmingly rewarding, why it is so worth it.

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day (4:16).

Despite all the adversity, this is why I am not discouraged, why I don’t give up. To be sure, the earthen vessel is decaying. This certainly involves the inevitable processes of aging, to which any of us Tim Duncan’s age or older can personally attest. It likely also includes the wear and tear that can come from serving Jesus. Persecution threatens injury and death to Christians in many parts of the world. Serving God in hard places around the world can be taxing. Even exerting oneself in ministry versus a life of comfort and relaxation could impact one’s overall physical health.

But something far more important is going on. “Our inner man is being renewed day by day.” Living for Jesus and experiencing His surpassing power working in and through us produces within us a joy-filled, resilient life full of meaning and purpose that no person or no adversity can take away. Jesus called this “abundant life.”

Author Philip Yancey records his surprise when he observed the intensity of this inner renewal in a very unexpected group of people. He writes of his interviews with “stars’ ... people who dominate the media.” He says of them “our ‘idols’ are as miserable a group of people as I have ever met.” He tells of “broken marriages ... dependent on psychotherapy ... tormented by self-doubt.”

He continues “I have also spent time with people I call ‘servants,’” and lists people who work with lepers, the homeless, refugees, jungle tribes, outcasts.

I was prepared to honor and admire these servants, to hold them up as inspiring examples. I was not prepared to envy them. Yet as I now reflect on the two groups side by side, stars and servants, the servants clearly emerge as the favored ones, the graced ones.... They possess qualities of depth and richness and even joy that I have not found elsewhere. Servants work for low pay, long hours, and no applause, ‘wasting’ their talents and skills among the poor and uneducated. Somehow, though, in the process of losing their lives they find them.”²

2 Corinthians 4:17

For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison (4:17).

² The Jesus I Never Knew, pp 117-118.

Here Paul provides another very important reason he did not turn back from a life devoted to serving Jesus, namely, that the hardship we endure for Jesus' sake results in immense, eternal glory. We will look at the many contrasts in this verse shortly, but first understand that "eternal weight of glory" here refers to eternal rewards, not entrance into heaven. Scripture clearly teaches that eternal life is a free gift of the amazing grace of God received by faith alone in Christ alone, apart from works, with no strings attached.

Verse 17 teaches that affliction that results from our faithful service for Jesus will be graciously rewarded by Him. Serving Him will be so worth it. This table highlights the contrasts of verse 17.

- Our current experience of affliction will produce glorious rewards.
- The intensity of our afflictions will appear light when compared against the immense weightiness of those rewards.
- The duration of our afflictions is momentary when compared with the eternal experience of the reward.

Experience	Affliction	Glory
Intensity	Light	Immense
Duration	Momentary	Eternal

After making these three comparisons, Paul goes on to say that the immensity of the glory of those rewards is "far beyond all comparison." He uses a Greek word that means "extraordinary" or "surpassing." It is the same word used in verse 7 referencing the "surpassing greatness" of God's power. But here Paul uses it twice! A literal translation would be an eternal weight of glory that is "extraordinarily extraordinary" or "surpassingly surpassing." The New American Standard Bible translates it "far beyond all comparison." Language is not capable of expressing how incomparably greater the glory is than the affliction.

The reward is so great, it is so worth living for Jesus, it will make any adversity we go through in this life seem like a tiny annoyance. It would be like trading in a toy plastic car and receiving a Lexus. Or it would be like receiving an all-expense paid trip to a Caribbean luxury resort for picking up a gum wrapper. Writing about rewards in general and this passage in particular, Earl Radmacher says:

In one picture it's *crowns* we wear, in another picture it's *garments* we wear, in another picture it's positions of *rulership* that are there. God seeks to come from every angle possible to try to get us excited about the life to come and to make us think with Paul that this life's momentary afflictions are *nothing* compared to the rewards of the coming age.³

2 Corinthians 4:18

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal (4:18).

Verse 18 tells us that faith is a critical element to living as an ordinary person through whom God can show His extraordinary power, because it is a life shaped and directed and governed by what is not seen. This is another verse of contrasts. We can live our lives with a primary focus on things we can see, which are temporal, here today and gone tomorrow, based on input from our senses. In the next chapter Paul calls that "walking by sight." We are routinely bombarded with messages from the culture in which we live that what we can see is all there is, or it is all we can know for sure. Certainly it is all we can base our lives on.

³ Earl Radmacher, "Believers and the Bema", Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society, Spring 1995 (italics his).

In sharp contrast, verse 18 describes a life informed and transformed by what we might describe as an “eternal perspective.” It is one focused on things which are not seen, eternal realities, based on what we learn from the Bible. And it is reinforced by interactions with other Christians also living with that eternal perspective, another reason why being engaged in Christian community is so important. The Bible calls that “walking by faith.” As we walk by faith, we will be increasingly available to God as vessels through whom He can show His surpassing power. And we will be laying up “weighty glory” enhancing our experience in heaven for all eternity.

Conclusion

We will conclude with both a positive and negative example from the life of one of the most prominent characters in the Bible, David. These examples highlight both (1) depending on God to demonstrate the surpassing greatness of His power in and through us, and (2) how that requires us to walk by faith and to live in light of what is not seen.

David emerged as a warrior for God as a youth when he faced an overwhelming opponent, Goliath. David’s response to the angry threats of Goliath wonderfully express the truths we have been considering today.

This day the Lord will deliver you up into my hands ... that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not deliver by sword or spear; for the battle is the Lord’s and He will give you into our hands (1 Sam. 17:46-47).

Walking by faith and “looking at the things which are not seen,” David trusted God to show the surpassing greatness of His power by defeating Goliath, and that is exactly what transpired. God defeated the 9-foot-tall “invincible” giant of the Philistine army, through a teenage “boy” (v. 33), who wore no armor (v. 39), and who did not use a sword (v. 50). Through the earthen vessel David, God demonstrated His power to “all the earth”, including the Philistines, who retreated in panic, and also to the army of Israel, none of whom thought David had any chance to succeed.

With a few glaring exceptions, David lived placing his confidence in God’s power throughout his life, until we come to 1 Chronicles 21⁴. Then, facing a major threat from an enemy nation, David instructs Joab to count his soldiers. Joab recognized the significance of what that request represented and tried to talk David out of it, but David insisted on carrying out the count.

Why was David counting his soldiers such a big deal? Because now, instead of trusting in God’s power as he had as a boy when he defeated the giant Goliath (“not by sword or spear”), David was now placing his confidence in his troop count, his military strength. That was such a big deal to God that it resulted in a judgment consisting of the death of 70,000 Israelite soldiers.

Whenever we face challenges or encounter adversity in our lives, we will respond in one of the two ways David did. We will either be people who instinctively “count our soldiers,” sizing up the resources at our disposal and relying on them to get us through. Or we will develop into people who characteristically say, “this is not my battle, this is not about the earthen vessel, this battle is the Lord’s.”

God both exhorts us and invites us to cast ourselves and our cares upon Him, to call on Him to show His power in and through us as we face the Goliaths in our lives. He extends to us the high calling to live as earthen vessels who “look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

⁴ Also recorded in 2 Samuel 24.