

Church

Part 2 – What is God demonstrating through the church?

Continuing on from where Part 1 left off, the question is: HOW does Jesus reach into every nook and cranny of human existence with the understanding that in his body our old sinful self has been bound, and in his body our new self has been loosed?

The answer, according to Jesus himself, is in **Acts 1:8**. It is **by the Spirit through the church**. The church's task, therefore, as Paul understood it, "is to bring out in the open and make plain what God, who created all this in the first place, has been doing in secret and behind the scenes all along. **Through Christians like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan of God is becoming known** and talked about even among the angels!" **Ephesians 3:10** (The Message).

So it's "through Christians like ourselves gathered in churches" that Jesus, as head of the church, is not only reaching into every nook and cranny of HUMAN existence with what God accomplished in his body, he's also enlightening ANGELS too. The church, therefore - to quote Part 1 - "is the greatest living demonstration in existence of what God has managed to accomplish for the entire creation through Jesus Christ." And it's all being done through "Christians like ourselves."

But HOW? How does God take ordinary Christians gathered in churches to be the greatest living demonstration of what he "purposed in Christ" (Ephesians 1:9) - not only to every human, but to every angel too?

Paul's answer in **2 Corinthians 4:6** is that, first of all, God personally **enlightens us**, "For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' **made his light shine in OUR hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.**" So God starts the process rolling by GIVING people like ourselves the "knowledge" that Christ is the key to what God "has been doing in secret and behind the scenes all along." Christ is the great revealer of God and his plan. Everything we need and want to know about God can be seen in Jesus Christ, because that's the way God set it up. To know God and what he's up to with humanity, we zoom in on Christ.

But how many people understand that, outside of those God reveals it to? No one, because "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers," **verse 4**. So why does God give "this treasure (of understanding about Jesus Christ) in jars of clay" like us, **verse 7**? We're just powerless pots. Well, the reason God gives it to pots is "to show that this all-surpassing power is **FROM GOD and not from us.**"

So, before we even get started on the church's mission of making plain to others what the Father accomplished in Christ, God makes sure we realize **how WE came to understand it first**. It's because GOD "made his light shine in our hearts." We didn't get it by any cleverness, study or discovery of our own, because we're just "jars of clay," and you can pour all you like into a jar of clay but it doesn't change what it is. It's still a container. Likewise, you can pour a ton of knowledge about God, Christ and Christian theology into a human head, but **unless God gives us the understanding** of that knowledge it's just knowledge contained in a head and nothing more.

So right from the start, Paul makes it clear that the power behind the church is GOD's, not ours. He explains why too, in **verses 8-9**, because he talks of himself and his fellow Christians being close to being "crushed," "in despair," feeling "abandoned" and "destroyed." There were times when they felt utterly powerless. And why was that? Because, **verse 10**, "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus."

Meaning what, exactly? Well, what did Jesus accomplish by his death? According to Paul in **Romans 8:3**, Jesus' death "condemned sin in sinful man" so that, **Romans 6:6**, "our old self ... that body of sin might be rendered powerless." Jesus' death broke the power of sin. But that was the reason he came in a human body, to wrestle sin to the ground as a human being and batter it into submission. He went through hell to do it too, literally in the devil's lair, where the devil tried to break him, by temptation, by false accusation and false religion, massive emotional strain, desertion by his followers, and finally being tortured to death – BUT the devil never got the better of him. Why not? SO THAT **in HIS body sin was totally rendered powerless**.

But how do people **know** that's what Jesus did, or what it means for them? By what they see in the church, because we in OUR bodies now carry what Christ accomplished in HIS body. WE are now the proof that the power of sin has been broken. People (and angels) see in ordinary Christians like ourselves that sin has been "rendered powerless." We are now the means, therefore, by which Jesus demonstrates his victory over sin - and what it means too, that It doesn't matter what the devil throws at us, NONE of it overwhelms us. And why doesn't it overwhelm us? Because Christ's death destroyed the power of sin and the power of the devil, and the Spirit is now reliving the power of Christ's death in us.

But if we think we can do that by our **own** strength we fall into the same pit as the devil, who thought he could tackle the power of sin on his own strength too. So that's why Paul gets the point across right away that we're over our heads when it comes to rendering sin powerless. We don't have it in us. And if we don't realize that yet, we will, because we go through hell too. Like Jesus, we're also tempted by the pressure and malaise of the devil's culture to compromise with sin, excuse sin, dilute sin and ignore sin, to the point it looks like sin has US defeated.

But there's a reason for that too, as Paul explains back in **2 Corinthians 4:10**. "We always carry around in our body the death of Christ, **SO THAT** the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." God lets us be almost crushed by sin - but not quite - to reveal in our bodies what happened to Christ in his body, because Christ was close to breaking point too - but he didn't break. Instead, he condemned sin. He took it face on and beat it. It reduced him to loud crying and tears and sweating drops of blood, but it never knocked him out.

And he now "reveals in OUR body" what he did in his. People SEE his life of victory over sin being played out all over again in the lives of Christians. They see that sin may knock us Christians down BUT - the same as him - it doesn't knock us out. They see us "hard-pressed on every side, **BUT not crushed.**" They see us "perplexed, **BUT not in despair.**" They see us "persecuted, **BUT not abandoned.**" They see us "struck down, **BUT not destroyed.**" What they see in Christians, therefore, is that sin's ability to overwhelm, destroy and totally control people really has been "rendered powerless."

And that's what the world needs to see through the church, that Christ in HIS body destroyed the best weapons sin has in its armoury to deceive and pressure us humans into self-destruction. But the means by which they see it in their lifetime is in the Christians they know in their lifetime, ordinary Christians - influenced and severely tested by their culture to breaking point, yes - **BUT** - who always bounce back. The self-destructive forces of the culture can never keep Christians under forever.

What an incredible blessing the church is to humanity, therefore, because Jesus is constantly demonstrating through his body of Christians that what he accomplished in HIS human body is true. He condemned sin and the devil to the trash pile of failed tyrants, the proof of which is Christians who are never permanently crushed by whatever the devil's culture throws at them either.

What people (and angels) see is a **POWER** in Christians that enables them to meet the strongest temptation head-on and **beat it**, to put the brakes on a vicious downward spiral of depression and self-pity and **pull out of it**, and to break free of their addiction to pride and image-building that held them enslaved since kindergarten.

What they see "revealed in our body" is that God's power in an ordinary person does extraordinary things. Amazing things. **Things that the devil and the demons couldn't do** - because they were tempted too, but sin got the better of them. It overwhelmed them. Faced with temptation, feelings of unfairness, self-pity, pride, hatred and all the other stuff the devil and demons now try to tempt **us** with, **THEY** went under, and they **DIDN'T** bounce back. But **what they're learning through the church** is that Christians **DON'T** go under and they **DO** bounce back. Why? Because we carry around in our body the death of Christ, that gives us victory over temptation. What he did in his body he now does in ours, and look at the result.

That's why Christ told his disciples they'd be his "witnesses" (Acts 1:8). Witnesses to what, though, exactly? Witnesses to what Jesus accomplished in his body. We are Christ's witnesses that what he accomplished in his body is true. In his body he bound and gagged the old sinful self that controlled all humanity, and in his body he loosed and freed a new human being that would never be under the control of sin again. Or, as Paul phrased it in **Romans 8:9**, "You, however, are controlled NOT by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you."

And Christ chose a body of people called "the church" who would prove that was true, by "revealing in their bodies" what he accomplished in his, that the sinful nature is no longer in control and instead THE SPIRIT IS, and what the Spirit did in Christ's body he now does in ours. "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you," **verse 11**, "he who raised Jesus from the dead will ALSO give life to YOUR mortal bodies through his Spirit, who (now) lives in you."

But that's what Jesus sent the Spirit for, to live in our mortal bodies what the Spirit lived in his mortal body. It's what the Spirit's BEEN doing ever since Jesus told his disciples in **Acts 1:8**, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses." Because we'd NEED power to be witnesses to what Jesus accomplished in his body. How can mere humans and ordinary Christians like ourselves witness to sin being rendered powerless? We need the Spirit to live in us what he lived in Jesus, because there's no way we can demonstrate in our bodies that Jesus rendered sin powerless unless **the Spirit** enables us to render sin powerless too. It is only "by the Spirit (that) you put to death the misdeeds of the body," **Romans 8:13**.

And that takes us back to why it was so important for us to understand - right from the start - that we are "jars of clay," because for us to fulfill what God has in mind for the church, it's going to take the Spirit to do it. We can be absolutely assured, then, that because we are mere jars of clay, the Spirit WILL now "give life to OUR bodies" in the same way he gave life to Jesus' body, so that what Jesus accomplished in his body can be openly displayed in ours. Wherever we go and wherever we gather as Christians, therefore, we are revealing to angel and human alike THE POWER Jesus released through his death that renders sin powerless.

And look what that power enables us to do, going back to **2 Corinthians 4**. To reveal Jesus in our bodies, **verse 11**, we "are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake." Imagine that. The Spirit creates, allows or takes us into situations that are the death of us. They are "far beyond our ability to endure," **2 Corinthians 1:8**. We "despair even of life." We can't take anymore. It's like a "sentence of death," **verse 9**. We sink into despair. We're beyond reason. We can't think straight. We feel like we're going mad. And no one can comfort us. We can't sleep, can't forgive, can't dig ourselves out of "The Black Dog," as Winston Churchill called it. We're in over our heads and drowning.

But that's what we're in the church for, to have our lives "given over to death for Jesus' sake, **SO THAT**" - finishing off **2 Corinthians 4:11** - "**HIS life may be revealed in our mortal body.**"

The reason we are taken so close to the edge, to the point our human strength completely runs out of steam, is so that CHRIST's life shines through, not ours. How? By the SPIRIT revealing in OUR lives what he did in JESUS' life.

And look what the Spirit did in Jesus' life. Right at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry the Spirit took Jesus into a desolate wilderness, and then, after starving him for 40 days, faced him with the devil himself. So, first of all, the Spirit drained Jesus of all his human strength, and at the point Jesus was "given over to death" - or as near death as he could be - that's when he faced the devil's worst.

But he won. And why did Jesus win? Because he had the SPIRIT's power in him, and under severe trial it was THAT power that shone through. And the devil saw it happen too. He saw with his own eyes - right there in front of him revealed in that emaciated, pathetic body of Jesus - HOW Jesus won. God revealed in Jesus' mortal body that sin in all its tempting, seductive power is no match for the Spirit's power.

And that's what the Spirit is now shining through OUR bodies now as we face the devil in our wilderness. How? By, first of all, letting the wilderness do to us what it did to Jesus. It drains us of our strength. The world seeps into our innermost soul, like a bitter winter wind. How can you ever stay in good spirits in a world like this? How can you ever stop feeling sick at what you see happening to people, and especially to members of your own family? How can you ever be a constant source of joy and encouragement to your spouse when you're weighed down by so many worries? How can you ever forgive what some people do? How can you ever stop being angry at people, and stop being a misery-guts and complaining all the time?

You feel so drained at times, and so powerless. But God leaves us in this world and doesn't spare us from its troubles, its lusts, and its endless stream of evil. He lets us try to cope on our own, by whatever means we can, by alcohol, by hiding away in isolation, by joining in with the crowd, by condemning, by scoffing, by blaming, by holding grudges to make people wake up and treat us better, all of which only dig us deeper in the mire - and we know it.

So why does God allow Christians to suffer like that? It's "for Jesus' sake," so that we can be witnesses to what he accomplished in his body. So that his life may be revealed in our body. So that what he did in the wilderness in resisting everything the devil threw at him can be repeated in our bodies by the power of the same Spirit. Because **the one big lesson** that both human and angel need to learn and see proved, is that **it's not by our power that sin is condemned and rendered powerless, it's by God's.**

And the way God makes that possible for angel and human to see is “through Christians like ourselves gathered in churches” in whom “the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living.” What humans and angels see is that same Spirit raising US from the dead. When Paul, therefore, “felt the sentence of death” on him, he knew exactly why it was happening. “But this happened that **we might not rely on ourselves but on God, WHO RAISES THE DEAD,**” **2 Corinthians 1:9.**

Paul realized that God gives us over to death so that God can then raise us from death. And through those who realize that’s what God is doing in the church, who therefore trust him while he’s doing it, Jesus has his witness to the power in existence that the devil never tapped into, and that’s why the devil failed when tempted. The devil blew it because he never realized he couldn’t resist the power of sin on his own strength. So Jesus SHOWED him in person in the wilderness how sin could be resisted. It was by the Spirit’s power, which Jesus first demonstrated in his OWN body, but now demonstrates all over again in every nook and cranny of human and angelic existence through his vast body of Christians.

God’s great purpose through the church is to prove and demonstrate that “he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies,” **Romans 8:11,** because that’s exactly how it happened in Paul’s life. At times Paul was dead in the water, but “God delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. **On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us,**” because that’s what God has us in the church for - to show the world and demons that it’s HIS power that lifts us up from the depths of anger, frustration and despair, it’s HIS power that shakes the blues, helps us think straight, enables us to cope in a bitterly frustrating, life-draining, ridiculous world, and it’s HIS power that will CONTINUE to do this again and again so that humans and angels will never make the mistake the devil made of thinking we can keep ourselves safe from the seductive power of evil by our own strength.

But the means by which God gets that point across is to let this world drain us in the church so that he can raise us up. He always lifts us up so we’re never overwhelmed. He may let us sink again and again, but again and again he pulls us up so we never go down for good, to prove that what Jesus accomplished in HIS body is true. Nothing knocked Jesus out, and now by the same Spirit, nothing knocks us out, proving to human and angel alike that sin and sinful nature really are gagged and bound, and a new human being has been loosed, that will never do what the devil did.

“So then,” Paul concludes in **2 Corinthians 4:12,** “death is at work in us, but life is at work in you,” because people see in us how, at last, they rise from the ashes of their self-destruction. And they see it happening to Christians all over the world, which is how Christ reaches into every nook and cranny with the message of what he accomplished in his body - and in one very special way too, coming up in Part 3