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 #1—It's Ok If You're Not Ok!

It's Ok If You're Not Ok---Admit Your Struggle
2 Corinthians 4:8-12, 16-18

⁷ *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.* 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 made visible in our bodies.*

¹¹ *For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.* ¹² *So death is at work in us, but life in you.....*

¹⁶ *So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.* ¹⁷ *For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,* ¹⁸ *because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.*

I've always heard the phrase '***everyone has a story***', but you don't realize how true that is until you spend time really listening to people, including complete strangers.

I was touched by the story of ***a woman at the shoe store*** last week, she just started telling me about her fiancé, a younger man who out of the blue had a heart attack before their wedding, went into coma, and then died, on her birthday in August! His favorite holiday was Easter and he loved Peeps, so she was wondering how to find them this time of year.

Everyone has a struggle---a mountain they've been climbing, or maybe one that's just coming up on the horizon of their life. Everyone has a struggle, because life is a mess in this broken world, isn't it?

Really, isn't ***everyone is struggling with something, all the time?***
 It's just whether we want to ***admit*** it to anyone, including ourselves.
Denial can be incredibly strong, right?

So **Paul's words are important to us today**, about being **afflicted, but not crushed**. 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 made visible in our bodies.

Paul is brutally honest---In 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 he describes his own life: Five times I have received ...the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, .. bandits, ... my own people, Gentiles, danger in the city, the wilderness, from false brothers and sisters;^[e] ²⁷ in toil and hardship, many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. ²⁸ And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my worry for all the churches.

The Bible is full of people who are not shy about admitting their struggle. **Job** cursed the day he was born, after losing his home and his children (Job 3:3-4). After losing her sons, **Naomi** told people to change her name to "Mara", because it means bitter, and she was bitter after such loss (Ruth 1). **Elijah** asked God to take his life after fleeing Jezebel (1 Kings 19). The **book of Psalms** is full of laments about the injustices of life, the tragedies of disaster, illness, war and more. Even **Jesus** cried out from the cross, in agony, from Psalm 22: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

One thing we learn in the Bible is that it **is ok to admit your struggle**. **In fact, it's honest, and it's healing**.

And ideally, **church is a safe space** for that. A safe place to come and **hand your struggles to God**, even if you struggle to leave them with God when you exit the building! We all know how hard that is, don't we?

Isn't this a place where we should **be real about our struggles?** After all, many people have faced **similar challenges** in this church. Mental health issues, Addiction, job loss, caregiving, grief, cancer, chronic pain...and so much more. Some have lost children, and some are hoping the prodigals come home.

What is your struggle today?

I want to encourage you to take a moment and just ***name it quietly*** in your heart.
What's the biggest mountain you are facing right now?

It means something to ***admit*** that, right?

In the 12 steps of AA, the first step is to admit
that ***you are powerless*** over your addiction, but the same can apply to any struggle.

Does admitting it mean you've got a handle on it?

Does it mean you know you can beat it?

Does it mean you have the courage to face it?

Not necessarily---Sometimes it just means you are going to hang on,
One day, one hour at a time, and simply ***survive!***

All of this admitting the struggle is ***different from self-pity.***

Self-pity leads to the ***blame*** game,

Or the idea that ***we can't ever get out*** of our mess,

Or that we are ***all alone*** in our mess, ***no one else suffers*** like us.

Self-pity may feel good for awhile, but it can't lead us to healing.

Legend has it that each day when ***the exiled Victor Hugo*** finished his meditations
he would pick up a pebble and throw it into the water.

Children asked him why. He smiled and said: "Not stones, children, not stones.

I am throwing my self-pity into the sea."

Little wonder that during those 18 years of adversity he gave the world

Some of the greatest books, and most profound insights!

Rev. Dr. Thomas Lane Butts, The University of Adversity, *Day 1*, 1996

If we don't admit our struggle, how can we hand it over to God?

We can't.

We'll just keep hanging onto it, like a chain around our heart.

So what happens if we admit we can't handle it alone?

That starts to ***change*** everything.

It changes our relationship with God.

When things really start ***falling apart*** ---

You may feel like you're having a ***breakdown***,

But—what if you are on the ***cusp of a breakthrough?***

All by the power of our living, loving God.

Shauna Niequist wrote: *when things fall apart,
the broken pieces allow all sorts of things to enter,
and one of them is the presence of God.*

***In Japan, there's a beautiful way of dealing with broken pottery.
It is repaired*** by filling the cracks with gold, silver, or platinum---
instead of throwing it away, they fill it with beauty!
What if God is doing that in us?

In **2 Corinthians 12: 8-10**, Paul asked God to take away his disability, his thorn in the flesh. And God said No.

God said:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."
So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.....for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

So true, and so hard to hear!

In the classic movie ***Forrest Gump***,

Forrest and his best friend Jenny meet up
after she's been on one of her prodigal journeys,
and they meet at her old childhood home, which is falling apart.
As she looks at the dilapidated house—she becomes overwhelmed with emotion,
Because this was a house full of physical and sexual abuse.
So she starts throwing rocks at the house, and finally she just falls to the ground.
And Forrest gently says to her,
"Jenny, sometimes there are just not enough rocks!"

Amen.

Sometimes there are not enough rocks, you know?

Or pillows. Or dishes.

Frankly, I say, ***if breaking something helps you---you should do it.***

(and before you judge it, give it a try!)

I know firsthand that breaking old Goodwill dishes is pretty stress-relieving!

So WHY do we need to admit our struggle, and how much it hurts us?

Why do we need to get real?

Because that's ***when the power of God can really shine in our lives---***

When we let go of our troubles,

We can surrender them to Jesus, who says to us ***in Matthew 11:***

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Wow—do you need that as much as I do?

We all need that surrender and rest for our souls, don't we?
And Jesus promises it is ours, we need only to surrender.

What if we let those words of Jesus soak in---

In fact, take a moment and say to someone near you:

Give it to Jesus, and receive rest.

Give it to Jesus, and receive rest.....

Does this surrender ***mean we won't hurt*** anymore?

Sadly, no.

Life still hurts, even when we give it all to God.

Consequences still come, even when we've stopped making poor choices.

Life is very ***messy*** on this side of heaven!

What it does do for us is ***bring us a chance at the life.***

Jesus promises in John 10:10

He says: *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

When we let go of our struggles,

When we surrender our problems to God,

Something can happen inside of us—***a powerful new hope can appear***,

And the chance for new life, abundant life, actually becomes possible!

It doesn't mean we won't hurt—

It means that God will work in our lives, and bring us hope and help,

Even ***in the midst of our hurt.***

Just like God's promise in Isaiah 43, God doesn't remove the fires and floods,
but God sure does ***walk WITH US*** through them!

Psalm 23 is also that promise—

that even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death---

God is with us, comforting us.

We are never alone.

We do not need to fear.

Our Savior wants to *provide* all we need,
including restful *green pastures and thirst quenching still waters*.
He wants to set a *table* before us—even in the presence of our enemies,
He wants to *heal* us with anointing oil, and *fill our cup* to overflowing!

And we've all heard that last promise in the Psalm,
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life—
The Hebrew word doesn't just mean "follow".
That word means *PURSUE*.

Jesus pursues us—He runs after us,
to bring us the goodness and mercy we so desperately need,
just like the father of the prodigal ran,
to greet his wayward son when he saw him from afar.

Do we need to get our act together to receive that?
Absolutely not!
(which is great, because none of us have our act together!)
We just *need to accept* God's grace and love.
We just need to *let go of our mess* and allow God to take it.

You know who else can walk with us through the valleys?
The body of Christ, our family of faith.
Our *church family* can be *fellow travelers* on the road of suffering.
There's a power in all the cards, food, gifts, errands,
and most of all in the *listening and presence* of other believers.

Have you ever experienced that through the body of Christ?
I can't even count the number of times the church has lifted me up—
the number of times that all of YOU
have lifted my spirits and brought me God's hope!

I was reading a sermon that described the *great Sequoia trees in California*,
and how surprising it is to learn that their roots do NOT go down deep,
they are actually so close to the surface you can see them!
So, *how do they withstand* the weather and winds?
Well, that's the beauty of those trees---their roots *intertwine*,
and the network of roots means *they hold each other up*.

That's us, friends.

We are the sequoia trees—
we are the ones who hold each other up, even in the toughest times.
It is that ***connection*** between us, that God uses,
to ***help us endure*** the weather and the winds of life!

So, it's ok if you're not ok.

You don't have to be ok to show up at church,
You don't have to be ok to be in this community of faith.
In fact, it's ***preferable if we're just real---***
with one another, and with God.

For when we admit our real struggles,
When life falls apart, and things start cracking,
That's when the ***presence of God flows*** in our lives,
And the power of the ***body of Christ brings hope and help.***

Friends, Hear the Good News of the Gospel:

Our Savior Jesus came that we might have new and abundant life---
That life is ours—in the ***surrender.***
May we all ***hand over our burdens to our Savior,***
And be real about the valleys ahead of us.

And to that, all God's people say, Amen.