

## Priceless Treasure in Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

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*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. - 2 Corinthians 4:7-18, ESV*

### **Where would you keep your greatest treasure?**

If you had something really valuable – something pricelessly precious to you – where would you keep it? Maybe in a Safe Deposit Box at your local bank. Or maybe, if you don't trust banks, you'd keep it in a locked safe in your house – fireproof and tamper-proof. Or maybe you just keep it tucked away in your top dresser drawer – which is probably the first place thieves look when they break into a house to steal something.

Would you keep it in a cardboard box in the garage? I'm guessing probably not. And yet that's where Paul tells us God keeps His most priceless treasure in this world – in the ancient world equivalent of cardboard boxes: jars of clay.

### **Priceless Treasure in Cardboard Boxes, v. 7**

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. – v. 7*

Actually, it's not 100% clear exactly what Paul is referring to when he says "jars of clay" in verse 7. The phrase just means a vessel made of clay, and it could refer to clay pots, as in storage jars, which functioned kind of like cardboard boxes in the ancient world – inexpensive ways to store liquid or grain. Or it could refer to a smaller clay vessel used as a lamp. Either way, the imagery is striking and fitting,

If Paul means a clay storage jar, it would be a very unusual, unexpected place to keep a great, priceless treasure. And what is the treasure? Well, verse 6 tells us: It is "*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*" It is not just Jesus Christ, but it is the gift of light/illumination to know the glory of God in Jesus Christ. And what is the jar of clay where this priceless treasure is kept: Again, verse 5 tells us: *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. (ESV)*

So, God keeps the light of the knowledge of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ in our hearts – that's where He's chosen to shine it. This language from verse 5 of shining light leads me to lean more in the direction of a clay jar oil lamp. In a clay oil lamp, the value and the cause of the shining light is found in the oil and not in the clay, which is just a vessel to hold the oil. It wouldn't be unusual for Paul to suddenly shift imagery from light to treasure. In a clay jar filled with priceless treasure, the value is in the treasure not the clay pot.

We were given a good example of the second truth when a nomadic shepherd boy in Israel threw a rock into a cave while watching over his flock of goats and heard a clay jar break. He went and investigated and discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls, the finest collection of ancient manuscripts and the most valuable archaeological discovery of the past 100 years. Just 4 of the Dead Sea Scrolls were sold for the equivalent of \$2.4 million, while hundreds of fragments and scrolls have appeared and been sold for millions over the years. The clay jars they were held in are much less valuable, and the value they do have lies in what they held.

The greatest treasure in the world is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of God's revealing of Himself and His glory through the Lord Jesus, who not only reveals God to us but who is Himself our peace, our forgiveness, our reconciliation with God. Jesus shows us God clearly in Himself and He also makes the way for us to be redeemed by God, saved and made God's own children forever. And God has put this treasure in Jars of Clay, in the most plain, ordinary, and unimpressive place: in us, in our hearts.

Many people want to love Jesus and have God through Jesus, but they don't want anything to do with the church, which is full of messy sinners who have a bad tendency to hurt and/or disappoint one another. And yet, we see and receive the love of Christ through one another in the church. We proclaim the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ from the heart of our plain, ordinary, messy lives. This is how God has chosen to shine His most precious and priceless light – the light of His Son – in us and through us.

### **The Painful Paradoxes of the Christian Life, vv. 8-12**

Having the greatest treasure in the world in our clay jar hearts doesn't make our hearts any less clay jars, and neither does being in a clay jar heart make the light of the Gospel of the glory of God in Jesus Christ any less glorious and wonderful.

This leads to a puzzling reality: We still sin, stumble, suffer, grow tired, get discouraged, face opposition, and at times just feel worn out or overwhelmed. That's Clay Heart Jar Reality. But there is something deep inside us, in the core of who we are, that cannot be touched, corrupted, or crushed by all these realities. That's Gospel Treasure Reality.

And these two realities explain why Paul says in verses 8-12:

*<sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, but life in you.*

Every day that we live as human beings in this world brings us one day closer to death. And, for believers, this reality is compounded by the fact that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, has said to us: *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."* (Luke 9:23, ESV) To follow Jesus means to embrace self-denial and costly discipleship for the sake of His name and His Gospel. This is why Paul said in Galatians 2:20, *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* To belong to Jesus means we do not belong to ourselves anymore.

Another way to think about it is this: For the clay jar to magnify and glorify the treasure within it, it needs to not be the focus of attention. It must draw all attention to its priceless

contents. For Paul, this meant a life of going wherever Jesus sent him and speaking to whomever Jesus gave him about the surpassing greatness of Jesus, even if that meant he was sometimes mocked, ridiculed, insulted, attacked, beaten, or stoned and left for dead.

And yet, even in this life of selfless service and suffering, Paul was blessed. He was not crushed. He was not driven to despair. He was not forsaken, and he knew he would never be destroyed. This is because he knew the love of Christ that nothing could ever shake and had the peace of God that surpasses human understanding. Also, even as he suffered affliction for Christ, he had the joy of seeing others come to life in Christ through his ministry. So, in the face of persecution and frustration, Paul knew an inner peace with the Lord and could see eternal fruit coming from his suffering.

### **Speaking Boldly in Faith, vv. 13-15**

And so, by faith, Paul and his ministry companions would keep on speaking the truth, no matter the cost:

*<sup>13</sup> 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, <sup>14</sup> knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. <sup>15</sup> 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.*

What is it worth to see someone else come to know the Lord Jesus and to have salvation in Him? And if we have believed in Jesus and have received complete forgiveness of sins and the full and free reconciling and redeeming love of God in Him, how can we not speak of who He is and of what we have found in Him? Faith that has laid hold of Christ for salvation and has found in Him the priceless treasure of the glory of God cannot stay silent, even in the face of deeply entrenched opposition.

Paul knows that even if his proclamation of the Gospel leads to his earthly death – as indeed, it ultimately would when the Apostle Paul was beheaded by Emperor Nero – the faithful and glorious Lord Jesus, who had conquered death, would raise him up and bring him into His glorious presence, along with everyone who had come to know the Lord through his ministry. Paul’s joy and pleasure is not only in pleasing Jesus by offering his life to Him in willing obedience as a slave of Christ, purchased by His blood, but also to see

others come to know Jesus through his ministry and come to share in the thanksgiving praise of God for the glorious salvation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

***A life lived for the praise of God and for the sake of others is an unquenchable life of true and eternal purpose and joy. Nothing else compares to it.***

### **Seeing the Unseen by Faith, vv. 16-18**

So how do we live this kind of life in this way? How do we walk in renewed encouragement and strengthening joy and hope in the face of rejection and suffering? By seeing the unseen with the eyes of faith:

*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.*

By faith, trusting God's word and leaning on Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit within us, we need to see things in proper perspective, always. When we do lose heart, it is almost always because we've lost perspective.

Paul had many very real and hard earthly afflictions. Following Jesus really did cost him everything in his earthly life. He had a pretty cushy gig living in Jerusalem as a favorite servant of the Sanhedrin, trusted by them with their authority to carry out the persecution of the followers of Jesus and the elimination of this rising upstart group. Once he met Jesus on the Road to Damascus, his life was forever changed. He could never go home again. He could never return to the former associates he had in Jerusalem. When they did finally get their hands on him years later, they only wanted to kill him.

After Saul was struck blind by Jesus on the Road to Damascus, he proceeded to go to Damascus, and the Lord called a disciple named Ananias to go and minister to Saul.

*the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen*

*instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized.*

– Acts 9:11-18, ESV

Notice verse 16, where Jesus tells Ananias, “*For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*” And Paul certainly did suffer – imprisonments, beatings, rejections, and more – far more than any of us could imagine enduring.

And yet Paul called all his sufferings “*light, momentary affliction.*” How could he say that? Only because he kept them in the perspective of eternal glory and joy, the “*eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.*” You cannot compare time to eternity. There’s no comparison between the finite and the infinite, between the temporary and the eternal. And there’s no comparison between the weight of the glory of God, which we will enjoy forever, and the weight of our pressure and suffering in this life.

And so, the key to living this unquenchable life is to keep the eyes of our heart where they belong, to “*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.*” We think this life is the life that truly matters, and yet the older we get, the more we realize how transient it truly is. By the grace of God, we belong to a better life and a better, eternal home, which we will consider in more detail next week.

Now, we prepare to take the Lord’s Supper, which is both a remembrance of the death of Christ that paid for all our sins to reconcile us to God and is also an anticipation of the supper to come, the eternal joy that awaits us. At this table, we feed our souls on Christ and get the perspective on life that is true, eternal, and transformative. May the Lord be pleased to fix our eyes on eternal things as we feast on Christ together by faith.