

THERFIELD CHAPEL

Sunday 12 December 2004 6:30pm

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2Cor 4 vv 7-18

2 Cor. 4:7-18

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. [8] We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; [9] persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. [10] We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. [11] For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. [12] So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

[13] It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, [14] because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. [15] All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

[16] Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. [17] For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. [18] So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

“But”, says Paul, “we have this treasure in jars of clay.”

What treasure?

We need a quick recap of last week and verse six of this chapter:

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.

The treasure that Paul is talking about is the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. It is a treasure given to us by God himself, not earned, not bought, not imagined, not made ... a treasure freely given to us by God through Christ. The treasure is the gospel of salvation - not just the understanding of it - but the intimate personal knowledge of it and the personal relationship with God that comes through the acceptance of the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. This treasure is given us for two reasons: firstly to illuminate us with the glory of God as revealed in Jesus - in other words to bring us into a relationship with Him; and secondly that we may carry that gospel of salvation to others. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Earlier in chapter 3, Paul reminded the Corinthians about the radiance that shone from the face of Moses after he had been with God on the mountain. The radiance was so strong that the Israelites couldn't bear to stare at Moses' face. Then Paul reminds us that that radiance was given when Moses received the Old Covenant from God - the covenant of Law that essentially spoke of sin and death! So how much more is this new treasure - the treasure of the New Covenant that speaks of the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ!

I'm not suggesting that this light is given to us so that we glow in the dark, like the children on the Ready-Brek advert. But it should be something that not only changes us on the inside but also shines from us and bring the light of the gospel to others around us.

So - that's the treasure that Paul introduces earlier in this chapter.

“Yes”, says Paul, “we have been given this light - this treasure of infinite worth, BUT we have this treasure in jars of clay.” And by that he means our ordinary, fragile human selves. We are jars of clay. So, Therfield, here at last we have biblical proof of something that I've known for a long time: you and I are Flowerpot Men - just like Bill and Ben!



Apologies to the younger members of the congregation who will be too young to remember Bill and Ben. When Noah unpacked his 3-cubit plasma-screen television from the Ark, there was a childrens' programme called *Bill & Ben, the Flowerpot Men*. Bill and Ben were string puppets made from flowerpots, they lived at the bottom of the garden near the potting shed and had a friend called *Little Weed!*

They were likeable characters but obviously very fragile. Tap them and they cracked. Ask for intellectual conversation and all you got was “flobbadob”. Little characters made from cheap unglazed clay, and quite hollow.

And, laughter aside, that is how Paul is describing himself, the Corinthian Church and ourselves. We are made from earth - mere clay pots. And he did it to stop any pride creeping in. When you're given treasure, you're likely to start thinking of yourself as quite important and worthy of it - but Paul sees this as a danger.

The message of salvation and the results it produces are glorious and divine. By contrast the bearer of the message is a mere mortal person. And Paul is talking as much about himself as he is about the Corinthians or about us.

As Paul became more and more aware of the value of the treasure of the glory of God, he also became more and more aware of his own unworthiness to be the bearer of this treasure. And so he uses this picture of treasure kept in cheap earthenware pots.

Some of you may have seen the crown jewels in the Tower of London, or those in Edinburgh Castle. You will have seen the strength of the security around them and the splendour of the buildings in which they are kept. Can you imagine them being kept in nothing stronger than a

piggy-bank made of pottery? Would the Queen of England keep her diamonds in an old flowerpot by the back door? No!

But The King - the King of Heaven - has entrusted his greatest treasure to the likes of you and me.... fragile, unworthy human pots of clay. And why? Well, Paul tells us that this shows that the treasure is from God and not something we have made ourselves for if we had made it ourselves, we would be greater and more splendid than the thing we had made. And we would be putting ourselves forward as the maker of this treasure and, therefore, drawing attention to ourselves and not to God.

Paul is very keen that we, and the Corinthians, do not do this, and so he brings us down to earth with a bump and reminds us that we are worth nothing more than cheap pottery jars. The treasure that we carry - the treasure given to us by God - is what we need to draw people's attention to.

So here we have a warning about putting people up on pedestals. I'm sure none of us need reminding that we should have the same humility as Jesus and not want to put ourselves up on a pedestal and try to make out we're someone special. But we also have to guard against doing it with others. We all know Christians who we regard as more mature in the faith than we ourselves are - Christians whose teaching and holy lifestyle we admire, Christians who seem to be blessed with a wisdom and Christ-likeness that we think we'll never achieve. And it's easy to fall into the trap of admiring that person to the point where we lose sight of the message and of the gospel that powers them. Too easily we try to emulate them rather than the Lord. Too easily we tend to think of them as infallible. We end up putting them on a pedestal - and, in their own weakness, some Christians are happy for others to put them on that pedestal and then the old problems of pride, conceit, abuse of authority and sin creep in.

Paul wants to avoid this at all costs - for himself and his fellow workers for the gospel. So he brings us back to earth and reminds us that we're too fragile to be out on a pedestal. Put a clay pot on a pedestal and watch the result when that pedestal is knocked!

God intended this sharp contrast between the priceless heavenly treasure and these cheap, rough pots of clay, so that no one would question the source of the gospel and its all-surpassing power. Salvation is the work of God, not men.

And if it surprises us that God should choose to entrust his treasure - this treasure of his glory and salvation - to mere clay pots like us, then it shouldn't! After all, isn't this what he did when he himself became man in the person of Jesus? The incarnation, which we celebrate this Christmas, and every Christmas, and every day of our lives, is simply this: that God became man and dwelt among us. The full majesty of Almighty God entrusted himself to the body of the wandering son of a carpenter from Nazareth. A treasure in a pot of clay.

And that pot was broken - smashed. Jesus was humiliated, tortured, rejected, killed and buried. But, far from being the end of the story, it was the very breaking of that pot that allowed the treasure to spill out and be given to the likes of you and me.

So when Paul likens us to pots of clay, he is drawing a parallel between us and Jesus himself. But with one important difference. Verses 8 and 9:

[8]We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; [9] persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

What God did not spare from his own Son, he does spare from us. While Jesus had to be smashed and destroyed in order for the treasure to be released to men, it does not need to happen again. The treasure having been poured out once, now only needs to be taken and shared with others. And we are the clay pots chosen to do this work - to spread the gospel. Yes, we may face hardship, yes we may find it tough, yes we may not be liked for doing it but we shall not be crushed, we shall not despair, we shall not be abandoned or destroyed. For all those troubles have already been taken on by Jesus himself, who suffered and died in our place. We may be knocked down, but we shall get up again.

Paul doesn't often use pictures and parables to get his points across, so this makes tonight's passage a little unusual in that respect. Paul usually just hits us with straight, prosaic Christian teaching and theology. I think there are two reasons why he doesn't use the pictures and parables that Jesus did when he was teaching. Firstly, he was mainly writing to Christians who did not come from a traditional Jewish background where pictures and parables were very much part of the culture. And secondly, it may very well be that he didn't want to make himself sound like Jesus, as this would have drawn attention to himself, and people might have said unkind things like: Oh listen to him with his picture language and parables! Who does he think he is? Jesus himself?

Had Paul been writing to a Church steeped in the language and culture of the Old Testament, then the expression "pots of clay" might have been of some significance. For example in the book of Lamentations:

Lament. 4:2

*How the precious sons of Zion,
once worth their weight in gold,
are now considered as pots of clay,
the work of a potter's hands!*

Here the expression "pots of clay" clearly signifies something that is worth very little. But I don't think his readers would have needed to have known the cultural significance of that expression to have known what Paul meant. I think, for once, Paul just didn't have the words to describe how unworthy he felt to be entrusted with the treasure of the gospel of Christ - so comparing himself to a common every-day cheap object was all he could do.

As a picture, or parable, I don't think we should push the analogy of the jars of clay too far, but verse 10 of tonight's passage is intriguing:

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

If Jesus himself was a jar of clay - a jar of clay that was broken, then maybe we could consider ourselves to be jars of clay made out of the broken fragments of that one great jar. Maybe that is why Paul says we carry with us the imprint of the death of Jesus. And maybe the gluing together of those fragments by the Holy Spirit into new jars is a symbol of the church - God's chosen vessel for taking the gospel to the people.

Like I said - maybe that is pushing things too far, but maybe worth some reflection.

Verse 11: *For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.*

Paul and the other apostles were frequently facing death for the sake of the gospel. That's what this verse means. It's not easy for us to relate to this, as few, if any, of us will ever be looking martyrdom in the face for the sake of the gospel. But for Paul, this was almost his credential as an apostle, which is why he mentions it here. And just as Jesus revealed his true life through his death, so too the apostles in a similar way were testifying to the life of Christ through the potential martyrdom of their own bodies. Skipping right to the end of this letter, Paul makes this thought clear in chapter 13 v 4 *For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you.*

Paul saw his sufferings as beneficial to himself as well as to others. In Philippians 3:10 he says: *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.*

The "fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" - there's a phrase to contemplate.

In verse 13, Paul quotes a part of Psalm 116 v 10. The full quote is this: *I believed; therefore I said, "I am greatly afflicted."*

The alternative reading in the NIV makes more sense: *I believed; believed even when I said, "I am greatly afflicted."* Paul is saying that he trusts in God even when he is afflicted - rather like Job did. And in that same spirit, Paul believes; and because he believes he speaks; and he speaks because he knows that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise him with Jesus.

And the speaking - the preaching of the word - was causing more and more people to turn to Christ and thus to cause thanksgiving to overflow and bring glory to God.

It was the very sufferings that Paul was experiencing that made him realise that he was in fellowship with Christ who also suffered. And that strengthened his faith - and that emboldened him to preach more. The preaching not only brought more people to salvation but also increased Paul's sufferings - which, in turn, strengthened his faith even more! You can see a kind of vicious circle here ... except that it isn't vicious! On the contrary, it is a circle which leads to the resurrection that Paul - and we - will share with our Lord when our days on this earth are done.

Therefore (verse 16) *we do not lose heart!* I should think not! If God is for us, then who can be against us? We might be inclined to lose heart when we see our own bodies, and even our own Christian ministry, start to lose some vitality. The battle-scars of living the Christian life do take their toll eventually. Maintaining a Christian witness in this secular society is not easy. Trying to bring up a young family to know the Lord in the face of all the pressures of the clamour of a hedonistic and materialistic society really will drain you.

But Paul reminds us that inwardly we are being renewed daily. That treasure from God is still within us. And we are reminded not to look at the pot - the outward appearance - but to dwell on the treasure which God has given us inwardly. This cycle of working for God, becoming weary and then seeking renewal from God again is a daily pattern - and one which, Paul tells us, is *achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all*.

So we should disregard the outward appearance ... in other words stop looking at things from a purely human point of view, when all we will see is pots of clay. Instead we should focus on the unseen - the treasure inside. We should see past the human point of view and look at things through God's eyes and in his light. What we see with our human eyes will pass away. What we see in God's light is eternal. As that wonderful old chorus has it

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
look full in his wonderful face;
and the things of earth will grow strangely dim
in the light of his glory and grace. [712 in Mission Praise]

The End

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.

[Numbers 6:24ff]

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