

Treasure in Jars of Clay

April 29, 2007

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

I love this passage because I love its message. It's a passage we can all really relate to:

7But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 8We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11For 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. 12So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

13It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, 14because 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. 15All 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.

Let's pray.

So far in 2 Corinthians, two worlds, two realities of the Jesus-following life, are being shown side by side.

Paul talks bluntly about hardship, struggle, and persecution, as well as being misunderstood by his fellow-believers in the church in Corinth. And he says he knows what it's like to be under a death sentence.

And Paul also speaks of God's glory and that we who serve God have a glorious ministry, about being guided by God, about the confidence we have as followers of Christ, and about the comfort we experience as those who know and follow God.

They seem to be opposites, but here in chapter 4, he comes up with a single image to describe what our lives are like: treasure in jars of clay. Maybe you know how the King James says it: "we have this treasure in earthen vessels."

Excavating an archeological site, the most common item found are pieces of pottery. Most are broken in pieces called shards, and sometimes we can fit these back together. Pottery broke frequently and sometimes the pieces were kept and used as the equivalent of notepaper. (Pottery was cheaper and easier to make than paper.) We're used to all kinds of containers—plastic, metal, you name it, but in Paul's day, pottery did it all.

Most of the time, a "jar of clay" was used for things like water or wine, but all kinds of things were stored in them. For example, they sometimes stored grain or seeds in these jars. And one thing you can do with pottery is put something valuable in it. Earthenware lasts a long time, and if you want to hide coins or gems or jewelry, pottery is a pretty good place to put it.

Our lives, our external lives, are kind of like pottery. We are useful, but fairly fragile. We suffer and we get old and we get sick and finally one day, we break.

That's even more the case for followers of Christ. There are people who want to break us, to crucify us, just like they did with our Master. The devil, the prince of darkness, wants to shatter us as well. We are that

simple, coarse earthenware vessel and life comes at us hard to turn us into shards on the floor.

But God has put something inside us. Inside the jar of clay that is our bodies and our lives, He's stashed eternal treasure. What we have is better than gold and gems and jewelry. It's what Paul called "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" back in vs. 6. Within us, God the Holy Spirit has taken up residence. In Colossians 1:27, Paul describes the treasure as "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

This is the real life experience of Jesus-followers: we have the glorious treasure of God hidden away in the commonest, coarsest, most fragile thing of all: our weak human self. This really is "amazing grace": God within us, even in our weakness. We have this treasure of God in weak human jars of clay.

You can look again at vs. 8-10 (look in your Bibles) and see the "jar of clay" realities and the "treasure" reality, side by side:

Jar of Clay	Treasure
Hard pressed	Not crushed
Perplexed	Not in despair
Persecuted	Not abandoned
Struck Down	Not destroyed

And at the front and end of that little paragraph, we're told the reason why this is so. All you have to do is look for the "so that's", what we call "purpose clauses":

Vs. 7:

*7But we have this treasure in jars of clay **to show that** [there's the purpose] this all-*

*surpassing power is **from God and not from us.***

That tells us that God's purpose through our lives is to put a spotlight on God, not us. God is the hero of our lives, not us. He's the savior and the king. We are the saved servants of God.

Vs. 12:

*For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, **so that** [there it is again, telling the purpose] **his life may be revealed in our mortal body.** We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, **so that** [another 'so that'] **the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.***

Only when you break the jar can you see the treasure. It's only when we're stripped of our self-reliance (which is a joke anyway) that we no longer rely on ourselves and so His power and life can be revealed in us.

Down to earth, what does that mean? OK, say a Christian man has a business. For years, things have hummed along just fine. No millions, but a good living. Then a fire wipes him out and the insurance wasn't adequate and the bills pile up. That's when he gets down on his knees and learns that God really does supply him his daily bread. That's when he learns that's he's a jar of clay, but that God really has put something in his life that's better than earthly treasure. That's when he discovers and really experiences that while he's hard-pressed, in God he's not crushed; that while he's perplexed, he's not in despair and that while he's struck down, he's not destroyed. That's when the presence of the living Jesus in His life is really revealed.

This kind of living leans forward toward eternity. It's concerned with now, but not consumed with now. This kind of living always has eternity in mind. And that's where we're headed to in 2 Corinthians. Next week, in chapter 5, we're going to look at one of the longest discussions of heaven anywhere in the Bible. But there's more here in chapter 4 that starts moving in that direction.

Look at 4:13-15 to get started:

13It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken. "With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, 14because 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. 15All 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.

One element of the treasure God's put within us is the promise of the resurrection. While life peels off the pottery that makes up our existence here, we don't despair because we are convinced that there's a day of resurrection to come. Just as we are convinced that Jesus Himself was raised up from the dead, so we're convinced that we also will experience resurrection to come.

When my father was very ill, and it was clear he was going to die, I came from California to Ohio to see him. I had a talk with my brother Tony about what arrangements had been made, and he told me that he "couldn't handle it." He just couldn't bring himself to go down to Tracy Brammer Funeral Home there in the hometown to pick out a casket and to do the prearrangement. So I volunteered. Actually, it was good to see Tracy, Jr. He was an active member of the church where I'd been baptized

and had handled things for my mother's funeral 16 years before.

I imagine you can guess that my brother's not a believer. He's never been able to face up to the reality of death, and like millions of people around the world he pretends that people don't really die. Christians believe that death is real. We don't deny the **reality** of death. We just deny the **finality** of death. Death doesn't get the last word: God does.

When you live that way, it shows. It leads to a way of life that draws people in because of its lack of fear. Vs. 15 talks about reaching more and more people and more and more thanksgiving being given to God. No, because Jesus lives, we don't live in fear, and that way of living brings glory to God.

Then, in vs. 16-18, Paul returns to theme of the inward and the outward parts of the Jesus-following life. What he says here is very important, and it's a theme he'll pick up again later in 2 Corinthians about the purpose of hardship. Hardship works in our lives to make us more and more like Jesus. Hardship works in our lives to make us more and more look again at vs. 16-18.

16Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

In other words, the clay may be chipping away, but not the treasure inside. As a matter of fact, from God's point of view, the treasure is getting better all the time. That is, our inner, eternal self is being honed and crafted and molded into a more godly, god-honoring shape all the time as we handle life's challenges with faith, hope and love.

17For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

It's amazing to me that Paul can look at all the troubles of life and declare them to be "light and momentary." This was not a man who led a charmed life. Over in 2 Corinthians 12, he tells us some of the hardships he's been through, and they don't sound like "light and momentary troubles" to me:

23bI have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. 27I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Corinthians 12:23b-27)

All this, Paul says, are "light and momentary troubles"! Wow. I wonder what he would consider a hard life!

Now, it's not my point, or Paul's, to minimize the hard things of life. It's to set them in the context of eternity. And it's to see that these hardships are "achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." Hardship we endure for the sake of Christ will not be forgotten in eternity. This kind of hardship polishes the silver and gold of eternity! God is

preparing rich rewards for those who endure hardship for the sake of His name.

Finally, to vs. 18:

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.

We look at what the eye can't see. We gaze at what the eye can't register. We skip over the temporary in favor of the eternal. Let me tell you the story of man who did just that.

When I was just a high school student, I met an amazing man named Richard Wurmbrand. He was a Romanian pastor living in exile in the U.S. who came to our church.

On February 29, 1948, the secret police arrested Richard while on his way to church and took him to their headquarters. He was locked in a solitary cell in the basement of the Presidential Palace and assigned as 'Prisoner Number 1.'

In 1950, his wife Sabina was also imprisoned. She was forced to serve as a laborer on the Danube Canal project, leaving their nine-year-old son Mihai alone and homeless. Following her release in 1953, the Romanian authorities told her that Richard had died in prison.

But a doctor masquerading as a Communist Party member discovered that Richard alive in prison and he was released in 1956 after serving eight-and-a-half years. He was warned never to preach again. While in prison, he went through terrible tortures at the hands of the secret police. Despite these warnings, Richard resumed his work with the 'underground' churches after his release.

He was re-arrested in 1959 and sentenced to 25 years. He was accused of preaching ideas

contrary to Communist doctrine. Due to increased political pressure from Western countries, Richard was granted another amnesty and released in 1964.

In December 1965, the Norwegian Mission to the Jews and the Hebrew Christian Alliance paid \$10,000 in ransom to the Communist government to allow the Wurmbrand family to leave Romania. Richard was convinced by other underground church leaders to leave Romania and become a 'voice' to the world for the underground church. Richard, Sabina, and their son Mihai left Romania and ended up in the United States.

Richard appeared before a U.S. Senate Committee, where he stripped to the waist and revealed eighteen deep torture wounds on his body. His story spread rapidly, leading to more and more speaking engagements.

In 1967, the Wurmbrands officially began a ministry committed to serving the persecuted church known as The Voice of the Martyrs.

In 1990, after the fall of communist government, Richard and Sabina returned to Romania after 25 years in exile and were warmly received. He was 81 years old. A printing facility and bookstore were opened in Bucharest, and the officials of the city offered storage below the palace of communist dictator Ceausescu, the very site where Richard had been held in solitary confinement as the location of the printing press. He died in 2001 at the age of 92.

Richard Wurmbrand didn't live his life thinking about now. He didn't follow Christ with one hand on the exit. He lived with the vision of the glory of Jesus and the glory to come in mind. And we are called to live the same way today.

PRAYER/END