

The Book of 2 Corinthians

Lesson 4: Treasure in Jars of Clay -- 2 Corinthians 4:1-18

In Paul's world, the most valuable things were often kept in the least impressive containers. A wealthy household did not store its gold in gold. Money and precious documents were frequently hidden in cheap clay pots, ordinary, breakable, unremarkable, precisely because no thief would think to look there. Paul reaches for that picture to describe the strange arrangement at the heart of Christian ministry and Christian life: "We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." The treasure is the gospel, the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. The clay jar is you.

That is a humbling and a freeing thing to hear. Paul was not an impressive container. His enemies sneered that his bodily presence was weak and his speech of no account. He was beaten, imprisoned, exhausted, and often near death. And yet through this fragile, battered vessel the light of Christ kept shining. Paul saw the point clearly. If the messenger had been magnificent, people might have admired the messenger. Because the messenger was so obviously ordinary, the only explanation for the power was God. The cracks in the jar were where the light got out.

So Paul refuses to lose heart, even as his outer self is wasting away. He gives one of the most honest and bracing descriptions of the Christian life ever written: "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." Notice he does not deny the affliction, the perplexity, the persecution, the blows. They are all real. But none of them is the final word. There is always a "but not." The clay may be chipped and cracked, but the treasure inside is untouched, and the power that sustains it is the resurrection power of God.

And that is where Paul lifts our eyes at the end of the chapter, past the visible to the invisible, past the temporary to the eternal. The God who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also. Our momentary, light affliction, he says, is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. So we do not lose heart. The outer self is wasting away, but the inner self is being renewed day by day. Read this chapter when you feel like a cracked and failing pot, and let Paul remind you what you are carrying and Who is holding you together.

Group Discussion: Paul says we hold the treasure of the gospel "in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (v. 7). Why does God so often choose to work through weak, ordinary, even broken people rather than through the impressive and self-sufficient? What does that tell us about where real spiritual power comes from, and how might it change the way we view our own limitations?

Personal Reflection: Paul describes being "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair" (vv. 8-9). He is honest about the hardship and equally sure of the

“but not.” Where in your life right now do you most need to hear the “but not,” the reminder that your affliction, real as it is, will not have the last word? How might fixing your eyes on what is unseen and eternal change the way you carry it?

Read 2 Corinthians 4:1–18

Study Questions

1. Paul says, “We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (v. 7). What does this image teach about why God entrusts the gospel to weak and ordinary people, and what is lost when we try to present ourselves as impressive rather than letting God’s power be displayed through our weakness?
2. Most of us work hard to hide our cracks and project strength. Where are you most tempted to cover up your weakness and limitations, and what might it look like to let God’s power show through them instead of around them?
3. Paul says the gospel is “veiled to those who are perishing,” because “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers,” and that what he preaches is “Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants” (vv. 3–5). What do these verses teach about why some reject the gospel, and about the true content and aim of Christian proclamation?
4. Whose servant does your life actually proclaim? In what ways are you tempted to point people to yourself, your opinions, your reputation, your accomplishments, rather than to Jesus as Lord? What would it look like to decrease so that He might increase?
5. Paul says 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” (v. 6). How does Paul connect the first creation with the new creation, and what does it mean that the same God who made light now shines the knowledge of His glory into a human heart?
6. Where do you most need that creating light to shine right now, a dark place of confusion, discouragement, or hardness? What would it mean to ask the God who said “Let there be light” to bring fresh light there?
7. Paul says we are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (vv. 10–12). How can it be that the life of Jesus is displayed precisely through our sufferings and dying, and what does this teach about how God brings resurrection life out of our weakness?
8. Think of an affliction you are carrying right now. Are you tempted to lose heart, to conclude that God has forgotten you? How would it change your perspective to believe that even this is an arena where the life of Jesus is being made visible in you?
9. Paul anchors his courage in the resurrection: “he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also” (v. 14), and he refuses to lose heart because “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look... to the things that are unseen” (vv. 16–18). What do these verses teach about the believer’s resurrection hope and eternal perspective, and how does this hope reshape the way a Christian endures suffering without minimizing how real that suffering is?

10. Look back across the whole chapter, the treasure in clay, the light of Christ, the dying that displays His life, the resurrection hope, the unseen and eternal. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this passage, and what is your first step toward that change this week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Romans 8:18, the sufferings of this present time not worth comparing with the glory to come; 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, the perishable body raised imperishable; Philippians 3:20-21, our lowly bodies transformed to be like His glorious body; Colossians 3:1-4, setting our minds on things above where Christ is; Isaiah 40:28-31, the everlasting God who renews the strength of the weary