

Treasure in Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4:5–12 (NRSV)

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. 6 For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 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.

Introduction. I imagine if you are attempting to raise children or care for aging parents, you know something about **life crushing pressures**. I imagine if you sensed a call to serve God in a particular way and in pursuing that calling things did not work out as you expected, you came to the **place of not knowing what to do**. I imagine if you have gone through a series of setbacks at work and at home and have been openly attacked by others, you have felt what feels as though there was a **relentless pursuit to harm you**. If you have lost a job, have a marriage end in divorce, lost a loved one or had a huge negative medical diagnosis, you know what it feels like **to be knocked off balance**.

For more than a year we have been in the midst of a season where the impact of similar type experiences I just described have been amplified exponentially by the pandemic and its effect. Quite honestly in this season many of us, including yours truly, have been sent reeling in the midst of these types of pressures..

So is it possible to make it through these experiences and seasons without being destroyed? Do these types of things have to leave us with permanent physical, emotional and psychological damage? Can we find ways to survive and even thrive when life is so tough?

Paul's words here in 2 Corinthians provide believers with a huge message of hope. I invite you to join me as we seek to understand the source of hope we can claim and live into.

Jars of Clay.

Paul here builds his case on a huge contrast - human beings and God. I think all of us would agree there is a huge gap between who we are and God is. God is the Creator and we are part of what has been created. God is all-powerful and we have very limited powers. God is all-knowing and we are very limited in our knowing even when Google is available. God is omnipresent and we can only be in one place at one time.

Paul points out that there is a huge difference between us and who God is expressed in Jesus. He points out that **Jesus is Lord and we are slaves**. Jesus holds the highest rank; we hold the lowest. Jesus is the emperor of the entire universe and we are his servants who are to do his bidding. Jesus is the CEO of the company and we are temporary workers.

Understanding this contrast makes Paul's metaphor come alive - **"treasure in clay jars."** You see God is the treasure and we are clay jars. We were designed to be containers where the universe's greatest treasure, God, would reside. We are jars of clay designed to hold the greatest treasure.

Clay jars have been used by human beings for storing many things since civilization began. Clay is found on nearly every part of our planet and has been used to form clay jars which have proven and continue to prove handy for storage vessels. You probably have some type of clay vessels in your home - they may be simply dried clay flower pots or expensive finely decorated fired clay urns.

One thing is true of clay jars regardless of whether they are fine china or simply dried clay - they are fragile. Even with the slightest knock or hit, a clay jar can be chipped, cracked or broken. **One must wonder why God would be willing to make his abode in such fragile vessels as you and me.**

From time to time we know of or hear of people of faith who go through extended seasons of pressure, perplexity, being pursued by opposition and being pounded by things that knock them down. Yet they are able to survive and rise higher. I think Billy Graham and Mother Teresa who lived out highly visible lives of faith and ministry but never fell to scandal or attack. Of such people of faith, we imagine that they must have been extraordinarily strong. Maybe they had kevlar embedded in their clay walls.

The reality is they too were merely jars made of clay. The secret to their endurance and resilience was not found in their personal characteristics or even their personal development. These came because of the treasure within them. God's indwelling gave durability to their jars of clay.

One of the great inventions of our age in terms of its ability to house liquids is the plastic bottle. If you are really thirsty, a cold bottle of water is a treasure. (Take a drink for a water bottle.) Yet as you know, a water bottle is rather flimsy and will collapse under minimal pressure (crush an empty bottle in my hands). Take a very similar flimsy bottle and fill it with something of substance, like sand and it is totally different. (Attempt to crush a bottle filled with sand.) The substance within keeps it from being crushed. It also gives the bottle a better likelihood of not being knocked over when hit.

The reason Billy Graham and Mother Teresa were able to survive and thrive through all life challenges was because of the treasure within them. Because the presence of the living God was abiding in them, they were not crushed and destroyed. The very same presence of God that was in them is available to each one of us.

The Nature of the Treasure.

Paul wrote that the extraordinary power ("hyperbole" power - over the top) is not of us; it is from God. The power that can enable us to survive lifes' toughest challenges and rise to higher plains even in the midst of them is not something that is part of our make up but comes from God. God is the very source of that power within us.

Think of this for a moment: God has chosen for his presence and glory to reside in you and me. When we follow Jesus, God places Godself into us. Jesus takes up residence inside of us. The biblical language of God living in us is rich. I want to focus on one aspect for a moment.

Last week was Pentecost, a holy day where we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit upon believers and the birth of the Church. On that Pentecost some 2,000+ years ago, the Holy Spirit filled 120 believers who had gathered in an upper room to pray. The Spirit took up residence in their lives.

This understanding of the Holy Spirit living in believers is prominent in the NT. Jesus as he met with his disciples just prior to his arrest and crucifixion told them he would ask the Father for another Comforter. He said this Comforter, the Holy Spirit, would be with them and live in them (John 14:17). In the early church, there was an understanding that the Spirit lived within believers. Barnabas was a man described as "full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 11:24). Paul understood this as well. He wrote to the Romans that the Spirit dwells in believers (8:9). In another place he wrote we are "temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 3:16).

I know that may sound like a lot of religious talk and seem to have little impact for us. But I ask you to pause for just a moment to understand this. God has chosen for his very essence and presence to reside in those of us who follow Jesus. God has come to live within us. The treasure of the very God resides in us. If you follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit is living in your.

We were designed by God to be a dwelling place for the divine presence. God created us in a way so that He could live in us. It is not that we have some kind of divine spark in us by nature or that in some way we are God. It is that the truly Divine Other, God who is totally separate from us, chooses to come to live in us. God is the infinitely valuable treasure who lives in us as believers. This is the treasure in these jars of clay.

God wants each of us to be filled with his hyperbolic power, his very presence so that we can live fully and share this life with others. God wants us to make it through

the pressures and stresses of life in a victorious manner. All of this is offered to those as a gift of grace when we follow Jesus.

Caring for the treasure.

When anyone receives Jesus as Lord and savior, God's presence comes to reside in us. It is a vital part of our relationship with him. God's Spirit takes up residence within us and begins to fill our lives. But that experience is not like bottling a bottle of Coke Cola where it goes through the line, is filled to the appropriate point and then sealed with a lid. Then as long as the lid remains on it, the Coke remains in the bottle.

God's presence residing in us is a living and ongoing relationship. Paul wrote to the believers at Ephesus: "*Don't be drunk with wine, but be filled with the Holy Spirit.*" The language of the Greek gives us the sense of the ongoing nature of this. The word for translated "filled" is in the present tense which indicates ongoing action - "*keep being filled with the Spirit.*" The contrast he uses gives us that sense as well. A person who is drunk does not stay drunk unless he/she keeps drinking. We don't stay filled with Spirit just because we had an experience of being filled.

As we live out our lives, the treasure of the Spirit spills over into other people's lives we come in contact with. As we are bumped and battered by life's challenges, some of the Spirit splashes out. To be filled requires continual refilling of the precious treasure.

Know this, God wants you to be filled to overflowing with his Spirit. When the treasure level is waning, God wants to fill you again. Sometimes, God just does that for you and me as a gift and surprise.

But most of the time, God desires us to take this three-fold posture: Opening ourselves up to the Spirit, inviting the Spirit to fill us anew and receiving the Spirit as he comes.

A time of prayer.

I want us to spend a few moments in prayer.

- Take a moment to open yourself up to the moving and coming of the Holy Spirit in your life.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you anew
- I will now pray for us.