

Treasure In Clay Jars

2 Cor 4:1-15

SS Lesson for 08/17/2014

Devotional Scripture: Jer 18:3-6

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Introduction

Overview and Approach to Lesson

The lesson examines how we have the ultimate **Treasure in Clay Jars**. The **study's aim** is to realize that we have and hold this treasure as fragile humans. The **study's application** is to live daily with gratitude for and enjoyment of having the treasure of the knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ. (Adapted from *the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary*).

Key Verse: 2 Cor 4:8-9

8 We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed--

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

The New Covenant ministry is glorious because of the certain triumph of Christ (2:14) and the transforming work of the Spirit (3:18), but it is not without its hardships. Physically, the demands of Paul's ministry sometimes seemed too much for him to bear (cf. 1:8; 11:23-27). No less excruciating were the spiritual demands (cf. 7:5; 11:28-29) brought on by those he served (e.g., 2:4) and those he opposed (e.g., 2:5). He reflected on these experiences in this passage and pointed to what sustained him, namely, the power of God (4:7). The ministry ("service"; also used in 5:18; 6:3; 8:4; 9:1, 12-13; 11:8) of the New Covenant was given to Paul in spite of his past (cf. 1 Cor. 15:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:13) because of God's grace and compassion on him. That same mercy sustained Paul through the many painful episodes that marked his ministry (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3-11) and enabled him to overcome feelings of despair (cf. 7:6). Thus he could write, we do not lose heart (4:1, 16). "Give up" in Luke 18:1 is the same verb translated "lose heart." Though discouraged at times, the great apostle never quit. One source of discouragement was the disquieting state of affairs in Corinth. This was caused by the activity of false apostles in the church and the passivity of the Christians. In the face of sharp accusations Paul found it necessary to defend himself before people who should have trusted him implicitly. Already he had adroitly parried the attacks of his accusers several times in the letter (e.g., 1:17; 2:17; 3:1), but he felt forced to do so again (e.g., 6:3; 7:3; 10-13). Some accused him of using the gospel deceitfully to serve his own ends (deception translates the Gr. *panourgia*, "trickery, cunning"; in 11:3 this word is used of Satan). Perhaps Paul had the collection in mind (12:16-18; cf. 2:17). In response he pointed to the openness (we have renounced secret and shameful ways... setting forth the truth plainly) and boldness (cf. 3:12) which characterized his proclamation of the gospel. Unlike his opponents, he did not distort ("falsify") the Word of God. Thus he could commend himself (cf. 6:4) before others and God (cf. conscience in 1:12; 5:11). Of course many people, particularly Jews (3:14-15), did not accept the gospel. To them it was veiled. But Paul would not change it to make it more palatable, as his opponents had done (11:4). The gospel was rejected by people who were unable and unwilling to accept it (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18; 2:14). They disbelieved and were abetted in their unbelief by Satan, the god of this Age (cf. Eph. 2:2) who, though defeated by Christ (Heb. 2:14), continues his hold over the present world (1 Peter 5:8; 1 John 5:19). His blinding of peoples' minds makes it impossible for them to see the light of the gospel. The gospel, then, is not obscure. In fact, it points to Christ who, as the image of God (cf. Col. 1:15), revealed God the Father by His words and actions (cf. John 1:18; 14:9). Christ was the Focus of Paul's message and the Object of his concern. Contrary to what Paul's accusers suggested (v. 2), he labored to advance the cause of Christ (for Jesus' sake) and not his own interests. Jesus was the crucified Christ and the resurrected Lord. Since Paul served Christ, he also served the church, Christ's body (Eph. 1:22-23). While serving the Corinthians, however unworthy they were, Paul was serving his Lord (cf. Matt. 25:40). The reason Paul served the church and openly proclaimed the gospel was because of God's work in his life. Much as in creating the world God acted to bring light... out of darkness (Gen. 1:2-4), so in spiritual creation He brings light to the hearts of those in darkness (cf. Luke 1:78-79; Acts 26:18). This had been Paul's experience on the Damascus Road, when "a light from heaven flashed around him" (Acts 9:3). Confronted with the risen Lord, he became a new creation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). The light in believers' lives is the knowledge of God's salvation, a glory issuing from and seen in the face of Christ and reflected by Paul (cf. 3:18). When people were in the darkness of sin, they had no knowledge of God, no experience of His life and salvation (Eph. 4:18). 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. The contrast is like a great treasure contained in common jars of clay. A deepening sense of his own unworthiness, compared with the grandeur of his message, characterized Paul's life (cf. Eph. 3:7-9). God intended this sharp

contrast so that no one would question the source of the gospel and its all-surpassing power. Salvation is the work of God not men (cf. 1 Cor. 2:5; 3:7).

In his earlier letter Paul had compared himself and his fellow apostles to “men condemned to die in the arena” (1 Cor. 4:9). The metaphors employed here evoked the same imagery to describe the demands of the ministry, contrasting human helplessness on one hand with divine enablement on the other. The contrasts include physical (cf. 2 Cor. 1:8-9; 6:5, 9) as well as psychological affliction (cf. 6:4, 8; 7:5-6). Hard-pressed is the participle *thlibomenoi*, related to *thlipsis* (“trouble, pressure, hardship”; cf. 1:4). Interestingly the words perplexed and in despair render two similar Greek words: *aporoumenoi* (“despairing”) and *exaporoumenoi* (“totally despairing”). Without God’s intervention these troubles would have broken Paul (cf. 1:8-10). The paradoxes in verses 8-9 dramatically contrast the weakness which marked the humiliation of Jesus’ earthly life and the power associated with His heavenly exaltation (13:4). In 1 Corinthians Paul had said the content of his message is “Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23). In this letter he referred to his own life as a demonstration of this humiliation, a constant reminder that through human weakness the power of God is seen to greatest effect (2 Cor. 12:9-10). In his own body he carried around... the death of Jesus, that is, he suffered intensely for Jesus and bore physical scars resulting from wounds inflicted by beatings and a stoning because of his testimony for Jesus’ sake (cf. 1 Cor. 4:11; 2 Cor. 6:5, 9; 11:23-25; Gal. 6:17). He was always being given over to death, that is, he constantly faced death (cf. 2 Cor. 1:9). Paul noticed that God usually chose weak people to serve Him (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26-29). He subsequently argued for the genuineness of his apostleship on the basis of his sufferings (2 Cor. 11:23-24) and his weakness (11:30; 12:5). However, the life of Jesus was also revealed in Paul’s body, that is, it was evident that he was alive spiritually (cf. 4:16). By means of these experiences his transformation into Christlikeness advanced (3:18). But though Paul saw suffering as paradoxically beneficial for himself (Phil. 3:10), he was ultimately motivated by the example of his Lord who gave His life on behalf of others (Mark 10:45; cf. Phil. 2:5-8). Paul believed his own sufferings were a means through which God could minister to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:5-6; cf. Eph. 3:10; 2 Tim. 2:10). As Christ had brought life to others through His suffering and death, so Paul’s suffering (with death... at work in him [cf. 2 Cor. 4:10-11]) was a means of causing spiritual life to be at work in others (Col. 1:24). What enabled Paul to endure in the face of this suffering? His quotation of Psalm 116:10 gives the answer. The psalmist referred to “the anguish of the grave” (116:3), but he affirmed his confidence that God would deliver him “from death” (116:8). That same confidence was Paul’s, so with the psalmist he could declare I believed. The second part of the quotation, Therefore I have spoken, is from the psalmist’s words about his own suffering: “Therefore I said, ‘I am greatly afflicted.’” Paul did not quote these last words from Psalm 116:10. But he probably expected his readers to understand that he had in mind his own disclosure of suffering in the preceding verses (2 Cor. 4:8-12) and throughout this letter. Paul could speak of his suffering and death because he was confident that God would deliver him (cf. 1:9-10). This confidence was founded on the resurrection of Christ, the Firstfruit and Guarantee of resurrection for all who place their faith for salvation in Him (1 Cor. 15:12-19; 1 Thes. 4:14). All this suffering that Paul experienced was for the benefit of Christians like the Corinthians (cf. v. 12). And yet Paul had said he suffered “for Jesus’ sake” (v. 11). This illustrates how he identified the church with Christ. Paul’s ministry to the church, Christ’s body (Eph. 1:22-23), was also a ministry to Christ (cf. Matt. 25:40).

The grace of God, His unmerited goodness and kindness, was extended to more and more people through the gospel Paul preached. Those who heard and responded in belief received salvation and gave thanks to God (cf. Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). As more came to the Savior, it caused thanksgiving to overflow (or increase). This verse underscores the selflessness of Paul’s ministry. It was for the benefit of others and to the glory of God (cf. Mark 12:33), not for himself (cf. 2 Cor. 2:5).

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Can you tell the difference between an authentic product and an imitation? Although many imitations are sold with full disclosure to that effect, some very expensive “designer” brands of clothes, handbags, and watches are often imitated by dishonest manufacturers that use cheaper materials and processes. Then disreputable merchants sell these imitations as if they were authentic, but for much less money. In popular terms, the counterfeits are called knockoffs. Most things that people value can be imitated with cheap, unsatisfying knockoffs. The message of God is one of those. Knockoff versions of Christianity pop up like weeds in the human landscape. Many people engage in bogus proclamations of cheap gospels that weakly imitate the real thing. Of course, the true gospel is just that because it comes from God, and

it depicts what actually happened. The gospel must be proclaimed by people whose lives reflect its truth, messengers whose lives have been changed by the gospel first. Only then can the real message have a real proclamation.

Paul's two letters to the Corinthian church were, in part, responses to criticisms of his own ministry. Some (many?) in Corinth saw Paul as bold and powerful in his letters, but timid and unimpressive in person (2 Corinthians 10:1, 10). They preferred powerful, eloquent teachers (compare 11:6). Paul responded to these criticisms, but he did more than just defend himself. He also explained the real nature of the gospel and what it means to follow Jesus. The power of the true gospel is not in the skill of the messenger, but in the message itself and in the messenger's deep, personal commitment to the message. That commitment will give the messenger a transformed character, one that reflects the message. That character reflects Christ's lowliness in becoming human and giving his life. It reflects Christ's loving persistence in enduring suffering for the sake of others. It reflects the honesty of those who know they stand before the all-knowing God.

Introductory Commentary From Bob Deffinbaugh

Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians gives us a fairly clear picture of the problems he is trying to address and correct at Corinth. Allow me to summarize those problems which Paul seems to address in our text:

- (1) In 1 Corinthians 1:10-31, Paul indicates that there are factions in the church at Corinth. People are dividing themselves according to certain leaders, one of whom is the leader of each group. Their leader seems to be the one who baptized them. These leaders are revered as wise and powerful. Paul reminds the Corinthians that the gospel is foolishness to the lost, and that those who are saved are those whom the world disregards.
- (2) Taking up this same matter in chapter 3, Paul reminds the Corinthians that those men whom they follow and revere are merely servants whom God has used to bring about blessings in their lives. It is God's work through men so that no one should boast in men, but rather in God (3:4-7, 21).
- (3) Paul and his fellow apostles (4:6-13) stand in contrast to these "super leaders," who are so esteemed by some of the saints in Corinth. The Corinthians who have aligned themselves with the "super leaders" feel smug and superior to the other saints, including Paul. Paul and his colleagues have become "**as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things**" (4:13). They are looked down upon as an embarrassment to the church, while their new leaders give the Corinthians a sense of pride since they are so smooth, so persuasive, and so wise. In reality, these leaders, in whom all too many of the saints take pride, are "**false apostles,**" as Paul spells out in 2 Corinthians 11. Because these messengers are so attractive and winsome, some are only too happy to give up the gospel, as preached by Paul and the apostles, and to embrace whatever "gospel" these false apostles might offer (see 11:1-15).

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Glory of the Gospel (2 Cor 4:1-6)

- 1 Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart.
- 2 But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.
- 3 But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing,
- 4 whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.
- 5 For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake.
- 6 For it is the God who commanded light to 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.

Truth of the Gospel (1-2)

The gospel is the good news of God (Luke 2:10-11)

10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.
11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

The gospel proclaims that Jesus died for sins (1 Cor 15:2-4)

2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

The Gospel leads unbelievers to righteousness (Rev. 14:6-7)

6 Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth — to every nation, tribe, language and people. 7 He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water."

Gospel declares the law of righteousness can be written on man's hearts (Rom 2:14-16)

14 (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, 15 since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) 16 This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

The Gospel declares the power of Jesus' righteousness (1 Cor. 1:17-18)

17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel — not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. 18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Satan's opposition to the Gospel (3-4)

Opposition by the blind leading the blind (Matthew 15:13-14)

13 He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. 14 Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

Opposition where Jesus is not preached (2 Cor. 11:4)

4 For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

Opposition by meaningless talk (1 Tim. 1:6-7)

6 Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. 7 They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

Opposition by teaching what the worldly man wants to hear (2 Tim. 4:3)

3 For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

Opposition by introducing destructive heresies (2 Peter 2:1)

2 But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them — bringing swift destruction on themselves.

Jesus the light of the Gospel (5-6)

The light of men (John 1:4)

4 In Him was life, and that life was the light of men.

The light of the world (John 8:12)

12 When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The light that we should put our trust (John 12:35-36)

35 Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. 36 Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light." When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them.

The light that is the true light (1 John 2:8)

8 Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

The light in the Lord (Eph 5:8-9)

8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light 9 (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)

Humility of the Messenger (2 Cor 4:1-6)

7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.
8 We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;
9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed--
10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.
11 For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.
12 So then death is working in us, but life in you.

Humility by knowing that power is from God, not man (7)

Power that makes God's enemies cringe before Him (Ps 66:3)

3 Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you.

Power that is great and awesome (Deut 7:21)

21 Do not be terrified by them, for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a great and awesome God.

Power that should cause the fear of God (Josh 4:24)

24 He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God."

Power that is mighty (Ps 147:5)

5 Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.

Power that cannot be turned back (Isa 14:27)

27 For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?

Humility in hardships (8-9)

Humility to endure hardships (2 Tim 4:5)

5 But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

Humility to not get weary and lose heart (Heb 12:2-3)

2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Humility to persevere (James 1:12)

12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Humility to delight in weakness so that God's strength will be made perfect (2 Cor 12:8-10)

8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Humility to enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22)

22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

Humility for Jesus' sake (10-12)

For Jesus' sake to know that it's treasures of Heaven that count (Luke 12:16-21)

16 And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. 17 He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' 18 "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' ' 20 "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' 21 "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

For Jesus' sake to ask for and seek God's will be done (James 4:13-16)

13 Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." 14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 15 Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." 16 As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.

For Jesus' sake to keep us focused on God's gain not personal gain (Acts 8:16-22)

16 because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. 18 When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money 19 and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." 20 Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! 21 You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. 22 Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart.

For Jesus' sake to keep us focused on God's grace (2 Cor 12:7-9)

7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

For Jesus' sake to know that we are competent only through God (2 Cor 3:4-6)

4 Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. 5 Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. 6 He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant— not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Persistence of Faith (2 Cor 4:1-6)

13 And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed and therefore I spoke," we also believe and therefore speak,

14 knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you.

15 For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.

Confident in resurrection (13-14)

Assurance through being united with Jesus (Rom 6:5)

5 If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

Assurance through a new birth and living hope (1 Peter 1:3-4)

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you,

Assurance because Jesus was the firstfruit of the resurrected (1 Cor 15:20-23)

20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22 For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. 23 But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

Assurance because it is an elementary doctrine (Heb 6:1-3)

6 Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, 2 instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. 3 And God permitting, we will do so.

Assurance because it is a trustworthy truth (2 Tim 2:11)

11 Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him;

Faith that results in thanksgiving (15)

Thanksgiving because it provides a blessing (Gal 3:9)

9 So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Thanksgiving because it results in nothing being impossible (Matt 17:20)

20 He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Thanksgiving because it provides answered prayers (Matt 21:21-22)

21 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. 22 If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

Thanksgiving because it provides an approach to God with freedom and confidence (Eph 3:12)

12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Thanksgiving because it pleases God (Heb 11:6)

6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts From Bob Deffinbaugh

The easiest approach to our text is to follow the flow of Paul's argument. The following points seem to capture the essence of Paul's words.

(1) *The gospel is the Christian's true treasure (4:4-7); we who believe in Christ are merely containers of the gospel ("earthen vessels," 4:7), and not glorious ones at that.* In chapter 3, Paul makes much of the fact that the gospel ministry, the ministry of the new covenant, is a glorious ministry, one whose glory surpasses the glory of the ministry of the old covenant. The glory of this ministry should sustain us in difficult times, but it should not cause us to feel proud or superior to others. Paul therefore begins verse 7 with the word "but," indicating that the glory of the new covenant ministry given to us is in contrast to the humble state of the Christian who is but a "clay pot," a container of the glorious gospel. *The true treasure is the glory of God in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, as presented and proclaimed by the gospel.* In contrast to this glorious treasure are the vessels which contain the treasure. Christians are merely "clay pots," while the gospel is the treasure. Earthen vessels (clay pots) are common and cheap, ones like those red flowerpots we can buy today for very little money. Earthen vessels are also fragile and easily broken. I have broken a significant number of clay pots. Earthen vessels are "earthy" and "earthly"; they are of this world. (Remember that we were made of the dust of the earth—see Genesis 2:7.) Earthen vessels are fashioned by the potter, who creates them for his own purposes (see Romans 9:20-21). Clay pots have nothing in which to boast; they have no basis for feeling superior. The treasure gains nothing from the pots; if anything, the pots gain from the glory of the treasure. When it comes to the gospel, the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Christian's "self-image," Paul tries to put matters into their proper perspective. The false apostles in the Corinthian church think far too much of themselves, and they have duped a number of saints into thinking too highly of them also. Paul's words give us the proper perspective. We who believe in Jesus Christ are merely clay pots, who have nothing to glory about in and of ourselves. We are the containers, and the contents have all the glory. Paul's words must have startled some of the Corinthian followers and even stunned their pompous leaders. If these men wish to represent themselves and their ministry as gold-plated, Paul informs the church that even the apostles are mere clay pots. Are these gold-plated frauds willing to forsake the gospel of Jesus Christ and replace it with a gospel which appeals to human wisdom? Paul reminds the church that the gospel is the treasure, and thus it had better not be put into the trash.

(2) *Our lives are like earthen vessels, which, when broken by suffering, manifest the light of the gospel* (see Judges 7:15-25; Matthew 5:10-16). Reading Paul's words in verses 8-15 in the light of the "clay pots" imagery of verse 7, one cannot help but feel that Paul draws upon the imagery of Judges 7:15-25. In this text, Gideon's tiny army of 300 men is about to do battle with the host of Midianites and Amalekites who have assembled against the Israelites. These 300 men are divided into three different companies, who surround their enemies at night with torches hidden within earthen pitchers, held by their left hands. At the blast of the trumpet, the pitchers are smashed, and the light of the

torches is broadcast around the camp. Simultaneously, these 300 men blow the trumpets they are holding in their right hands. The enemy armies panic, turning on each other with their swords, bringing a great victory for Gideon and his men. Paul may be employing this imagery in his letter to the Corinthians to make an important point, one that has never been very popular. We are like the clay pots of Gideon and his men; when we are broken, the light of the gospel is shed abroad. And when we are broken like clay pots, our strength or power is not seen, but God's. When we are broken by adversity, opposition, and suffering, God's power is revealed, and God's work is accomplished in a way that does not glorify the "clay pots" but manifests God's surpassing power and glory. Here again is a most important lesson for the Corinthians. Men are brought to the light of the gospel not by the exaltation of the messenger, but by the exaltation of Christ. As we, the clay pots, are broken by suffering, men see the light. Several analogies come to mind. In a sense, we are windows whose purpose is not to be seen, but to be seen through. Men should not see the glass, but in looking through the glass, they should behold the majesty and glory of God, whom we have the privilege of proclaiming. We might say Christians are like the glass in a fire alarm box, which must be broken so that lives may be saved. Or we might compare the Christian to the piata, which is filled with various treats. As the piata is beaten and broken, the "treasure" within is poured out, much to the delight of those seeking it. It is not by the exalting of the messenger that God's power and glory are revealed, but by the breaking of the container that the contents are dispensed.

(3) The suffering Christian's experience may seem as though it will break us, but as intense as it may be, God never allows such intense suffering that it defeats or destroys us, or defeats what God purposes to accomplish through it.

By means of suffering, we, God's "clay pots," are broken, so that the glorious light of the gospel and the power of God are evident. In the midst of our brokenness, it may appear that our suffering will utterly defeat and destroy us, but this is not true. Paul assures us in verses 8 and 9 that no matter what our affliction may be, and no matter how severe, God will not allow us to be destroyed by it. The Christian is afflicted in every way (verse 8), suffering the full orb of afflictions of mankind. In the context, it seems that our affliction arises from our status as Christians, who profess and proclaim Christ. Paul enumerates four forms of intense suffering; each followed by an assurance that our affliction will not result in complete failure or destruction. (1) afflicted — but not crushed; (2) perplexed — but not despairing; (3) persecuted — but not forsaken; (4) struck down — but not destroyed. Paul says that he and other saints are "afflicted" (verse 8). This word is used for the squeezing or pressing in upon our Lord by the crowds (Mark 3:9). In spite of great external pressure, we may be assured that we will *not be crushed*, like a submarine which has descended to depths and pressures beyond its limits. We are "perplexed" but "not despairing" (verse 8). This word is used to describe Herod's inner turmoil in listening to the preaching of John the Baptist (Mark 6:20). The Christian will face many unanswered questions, many perplexing circumstances. But while we acknowledge there are questions for which we have no immediate answers, we also stand assured that there is an answer, and that someday in eternity we will know what it is. Thus, we may be perplexed, but we do not despair as though there are no answers at all, as though there is no hope. We are "persecuted" but "not forsaken." If anyone knows persecution, it is the Apostle Paul. He is a man who dished out persecution as an unbeliever. He is a man greatly persecuted as a Christian. But while men may reject us and our message, as Christians we are never completely abandoned. Like Joseph in Egypt, or Daniel and his three friends in Babylon, the Lord is with us, even in the fiery furnace. Paul witnessed this in a dramatic fashion at the stoning of Stephen. In his dying moments, as he was rejected and persecuted by his fellow Jews, Stephen saw his Lord standing at the right hand of God, waiting to receive him into heaven's glory (Acts 7:54-56). Even when it seems so, we are never alone, though the whole world seems against us and the message of the gospel we proclaim. Finally, we may be "struck down," but we can never be "destroyed" (verse 9). One can hardly think of a more dramatic illustration than Paul's experience at Lystra described in Acts 14 (see especially verses 19 and 20). Paul was stoned and left for dead, but when the disciples gathered around him, he arose and entered the city. Paul is not assuring us that we will never die a martyr's death, but that if we do die, we may be assured of our future resurrection. *There is no suffering, no affliction, which God will allow to ultimately defeat and destroy us, for He causes all things to work together for His glory and for our good (Romans 8:28)*. Not until we have reached the limits of our own capacity do we find it absolutely necessary to cast ourselves on God. God uses our suffering and adversity to take us beyond our own capacities, so that we will turn to Him for strength and survival. Thus, it is His power which sustains us, and it is He who must receive the praise and glory. God does not leave us with a full tank of gas, but with a tank virtually empty. As the gauge reads "empty" and the red warning light begins to flash, we must seek reserves which are not our own. I am reminded of the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath recorded in 1 Kings 17:8-16. As Elijah arrives, the widow's flour and oil are gone. She has only enough to prepare one final meal for herself and her son. Elijah promises the widow that if she provides for him, her flour and oil will never run out, but she will be provided for until the time the drought ends. God does provide for Elijah, the widow, and her son, but He never gives her a full barrel of flour. Instead, He continues to provide just enough for the next meal. The flour barrel is always nearly empty, but it never runs dry. God does not give

a full barrel of flour, as He could do, because He wants this widow to trust Him daily. Is this not why our Lord prayed, **“Give us this day our daily bread”** (Matthew 6:11)?

(4) The suffering we are called to endure, which will never utterly destroy us, is the divinely appointed, irreplaceable means by which God manifests His life in our mortal bodies. Paul writes in Philippians 1, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” I have always understood these words to mean, “For to me, living is glorious, and dying is even better.” Just what does it mean to live Christ? Paul tells us in our text. But let us be very clear: he is telling us nothing new at all. Over and over again in the Bible, we are informed that to live Christ is to live out His life, experiencing the same things He experienced, and exhibiting the same responses and the same manifestation of God’s power (Matthew 5:10-16; Luke 9:21-26; John 15:18-20; see also Matthew 10:16-23). These same men have written to us what Jesus taught His disciples: *we live out the life of Christ by living righteously in a wicked world*, thereby experiencing the rejection and persecution of those who want nothing to do with Christ and His gospel (Acts 14:21-22; Colossians 1:24-29; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6; 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 2:18-25; 1 Peter 4:12-13). *God chose to use us, His “clay pots,” because He wishes to display His power and His glory through our weaknesses and brokenness.* As we mere “clay pots” are broken, God’s power and glory are revealed through us. The process of being broken is now referred to as **“dying”** (see 2 Corinthians 4:10-12). There is the once-and-for-all death of our Lord in our place, whereby our sins are forgiven as we are joined to His death and resurrection by the Holy Spirit (Romans 6:1-7; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 2:20). This once-for-all-death which we die in Christ is played out by our daily “taking up our cross” and dying to the flesh and its desires, our persecution at the hands of unbelievers, and perhaps even our martyrdom for the sake of Christ. In our daily living out the dying of Christ, we also live out His resurrection life and power. As we first must reckon ourselves dead in our trespasses and sins, powerless to save ourselves by any work we can do (Ephesians 2:1-10), we must also realize that, even as Christians, *we are powerless in and of ourselves to live a godly life.* We, like Paul, must conclude daily, **“Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?”** (Romans 7:24). And as we die daily, the resurrection power of God works in and through us to produce His righteousness (Romans 8:10-11). We are not made righteous by trying to live for Christ, but by dying to self and to sin so that Christ’s life is lived out in us. This principle is absolutely crucial. Paul repeats it three times in our short text (verses 10-12). Dying is not an option for the Christian. As unworthy sinners, we had to die with Christ and be raised with Him from the dead in order to be saved. As weak and powerless saints, to live out the life of Christ, we must die daily to the world, to sin, and to the flesh (Matthew 16:25; John 12:24). Paul says in our text that as clay pots, we must be broken for the light of the glory of Christ to be shown forth. He says that in order for the life of Christ to become evident in our bodies, we must die first. No wonder our Lord speaks of being **“lights”** in the world in the context of suffering and persecution (Matthew 5:10-16; see 11:16-33).

(5) The suffering which breaks these “clay pots” should not result in our silence, but should become the basis for our proclaiming boldly the good news of the gospel. Peter speaks of a kind of silence which is godly in the midst of suffering as a saint (see 1 Peter 2:18–3:6). In the midst of our sufferings, it is all too easy to use our mouths to fight back. This we must not do, but neither should we become silent about our faith to avoid further persecution and suffering. Just as we have experienced the resurrection power of God in our salvation and daily walk, we should hope for our ultimate resurrection at the return of our Lord. If we will be raised from the dead, then men cannot take away our future hope, even by taking our lives. We need not fear death. And if we do not fear death, we need not become silent in times of opposition and danger. This is the intent of Paul’s teaching in verses 13 and 14. Paul turns in verse 13 to the words of the psalmist to underscore that Christians can boldly proclaim the gospel in the face of opposition and danger, knowing that God will raise them from the dead. The words, **“I believed, therefore I spoke”** are virtually the same as those found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. Translations of Psalm 116:10 vary considerably in the way they render this verse. In our text, Paul is not simply borrowing a phrase, he is establishing a principle. Psalm 116 is about the believer’s confidence in God, even in death. Verse 15 is a favorite for many Christians and a text often employed in funeral messages: “Precious in the sight of the LORD Is the death of His godly ones” (Psalm 116:15). When the psalmist writes, **“I believed, therefore I spoke,”** he then goes on to write as his next words, **“I am greatly afflicted.”** I believe this psalm expresses the psalmist’s faith in God, a resurrection faith. He can call upon God when in great danger, knowing that God may rescue him from death, or that He may rescue him after death by resurrecting him from the grave. Strengthened and encouraged by his faith, the psalmist can face and endure persecution, adversity, danger, and even death. He need not be, and he will not be, silent about his suffering, for his faith sees beyond his suffering and death. In this same spirit of faith, Paul says that just as he can be bold in his witness, even though it may bring persecution and even death, so can we. We need not hide our suffering and affliction or be silent about the good news of the gospel, for the life of Christ is manifested in our death. If the worst men can do is kill us, and if God has already promised to raise us from the dead, then what should we fear, and why should we keep

silent? If suffering and dying are the divinely appointed means of revealing God's power and glory in our lives, why should we seek to conceal our afflictions? There is little justification here for the "silent witness" approach. There are times when we do need to be silent, especially when our speech will not glorify God or edify others. But when the time comes for us to declare our faith and proclaim the gospel, we must speak (see Romans 10:9-10). When our silence is the result of our shame or our fear, it is evil (see Luke 9:21-26).

(6) Being broken as an earthen vessel means dying to one's self so that we can serve others and glorify God. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul indicates that he and others can be bold in their speech concerning Christ because of the vastly greater glory of the ministry of the new covenant, the ministry of the gospel (see 3:12). Repeatedly, Paul speaks of the glory of the gospel ministry of which every saint is a part. The gospel is the revelation of the light of the gospel, which is the **"knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ"** (4:6). The glory is not ours, but God's. The gospel is the treasure, and, as we are broken, we are but the earthly vessels God has chosen to contain and display His gospel. What marvelous grace and privilege God has bestowed upon these earthen vessels. Some believe that we are to love ourselves first, God next, and others last. They are dead wrong. But many others believe we are to love God first, others next, and self last. Perhaps there is a sense in which this is true, but Paul does not present his argument this way in our text. Paul speaks of our being broken, our dying, so that others may benefit and God may be glorified. I am to die to the world, the flesh, and self-interest so that I may serve others and glorify God. Paul writes in verse 7 that God has entrusted the true treasure of the gospel to **"clay pots,"** so that the **"surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves."** There is no ground for boasting or pride here, other than that boasting and pride directed toward God. As Paul concludes his argument in verse 15, once again his emphasis is on serving others and glorifying God: "For all things *are* for your sakes, that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God." Paul's sufferings are the sufferings of Christ. They are his dying—dying to self-interest, fleshly desires, worldly ambitions and goals. They are like Christ's sufferings in that they are for the blessing of others. Paul's dying brings life to the Corinthians (verse 12). Paul's suffering is for the Corinthians' sakes (verse 15). And ultimately, as people are brought to faith in Christ and saints are strengthened in their faith, praise and thanksgiving are offered to God, to His glory. Here is the perspective every believer should have. Here is where Paul and the true apostles stand apart from the false apostles. The false apostles are self-serving, seeking power, glory and personal gain for themselves. Paul and the faithful servants of Christ are, like Christ, sacrificing themselves for the good of others and the glory of God. The false apostles appeal to men on the basis of the flesh, focusing on the satisfaction of fleshly lusts. Like Christ, Paul calls upon the saints to take up their cross and follow Him. The gap between the true and the false apostles grows ever greater as Paul's letter continues.

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Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. God-pleasing ministry requires honesty, integrity, and accountability (2 Cor. 4:2)
2. Satan blinds men to the gospel, but Christ can open their eyes (vss. 3-4)
3. Preaching's focus should always be Christ, and the glory of God its goal (vss. 5-6)
4. In our weak flesh God demonstrates His great grace and strength (vss. 7-9)
5. Suffering for Christ assures us of eternal life with Christ (II Cor. 4:10-12; cf. Acts 14:22)
6. Suffering for Christ brings encouragement to others and glory to God (2 Cor. 4:13-15)