

Jars of Clay II Cor. 4 (selected verses) 3/24/19

In Feb. of 1954 a Navy pilot took off from an aircraft carrier on a night training mission off the coast of Japan. The mission took place in stormy weather, forcing the pilot to rely on his directional finder, which malfunctioned, heading him in the wrong direction. In time, he was hopelessly lost over the sea. Then his instrument panel shorted out, burning out all the lights in the cockpit! He could see absolutely nothing inside or outside of his plane. I'll tell you the rest of the story later in the sermon! But first, we're going to go back in time about 1900 years to the Apostle Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, Greece. (The letter actually relates to the story about the pilot!)

Paul had founded the church in Corinth, spending about two years there. After he left the church to continue his missionary work elsewhere, all kinds of problems plagued the new church. False teachers followed Paul, telling the people that Paul's teaching that salvation depends solely on God's grace was flawed. These teachers believed that if anyone wanted to be right with God, it was necessary for them to keep the Old Testament laws, too. Major divisions occurred in the church. Immoral actions by church leaders were tolerated. Paul's first letter to them sought to address these concerns. It helped, but didn't solve the problems.

So, this letter was written to respond once again to the mess their church had become. In this letter Paul reminds them about his good, compassionate, honest ministry with them. He talks specifically about being a minister of the “new covenant.” The old covenant, God’s covenant with Israel, was based on following the law. Since no one could keep the law, that covenant led only to frustration and eventually to judgment. But the new covenant is based not on keeping the law, but on simply accepting what God has done for us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That’s how we are reconciled to God, not by trying to become good enough. That’s the message that Paul had always taught as a minister of the new covenant. It’s the “treasure” that he refers to in these verses from chapter 4.

⁷But 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. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹For 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. (II Cor. 4:7-11)

Paul packs a lot into this short passage. He begins with the powerful image of a precious treasure contained in clay jars, the common everyday kitchen pots of the ancient world. The treasure he refers to is the gospel message that he has been called to proclaim. (You may have heard of the Christian rock band, “Jars of Clay.” This is where their name comes from.) At any rate, Paul refers to himself and his fellow ministers as jars of clay—ordinary, fragile containers of the astonishing good news of God’s love and offer of grace for us.

An elderly man from Tucson, Arizona brought an old blanket he had inherited a few years before to the “Antiques Roadshow.” He kept it in his bedroom, where he had thrown it over the back of a rocking chair. When the expert appraiser saw the blanket, he became very excited. He told the man that this was a Navajo chief’s blanket from the 1840’s. It was in wonderful condition, and was the oldest, best-preserved Navajo blanket he had ever seen outside of a museum. He estimated its value between \$350,000 and \$500,000. It was a great treasure kept in very ordinary surroundings.

That’s what Paul has in mind when he talks about God’s great treasure being contained in human jars of clay. Paul goes on to describe what being “clay jars” looked like for them. He says they were *“Afflicted...but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;*

persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” Or, “knocked down, but not out,” as another translator puts it.

The book of Acts details the hardships that Paul and his fellow ministers endured as they took this treasure, the Good News of the gospel, around the ancient world. They were beaten, jailed, shipwrecked, slandered, unjustly run out of cities, often sick, and on and on. It would have been easy to give up, to think that God wasn't with them, or certainly wasn't protecting them. But Paul had another perspective on these hardships.

Have you ever seen those pictures that look like one thing from one perspective and another thing from a different perspective? Here are two examples. Vase & Faces slide. Duck and Rabbit slide. These pictures are kind of fun to look at. Paul does something similar here in our passage. It would certainly have been possible to see tragedy in his description of his ministry- so much suffering and failure. But Paul sees something else.

⁷But 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. (II Cor. 4:7) For Paul, all the hardships that came along with being human carriers of the good news serve as proof to everyone who sees him that the power of the gospel to change lives and societies doesn't come from him.

At times, he's barely hanging on to life! The power must come from the treasure itself, from the gospel message and the God who announces it.

All of us have to deal with the limits and suffering that come with being human. We're gifted in some areas, but not in others. There never seems to be enough time in our lives to take care of even the most important things we are facing. We may lose our savings through bad investments, fraud, or changing market conditions. People we love get sick or injured, or we get sick or injured. And, aging is not for cowards! All kinds of afflictions can come with aging. And ultimately, death gets us all! We are fragile jars of clay. And, all of those afflictions and set-backs can threaten to undermine our faith. "Why even try?" we may wonder.

Paul doesn't deny the sorrow and frustration and pain that come in our lives. But he doesn't believe that these trials are without purpose. He believes that God can use them for a greater good, to further the cause of the gospel. That's why he can say this a few verses later. ¹⁶*So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.* ¹⁷*For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure. (II Cor. 4:16,17)*

“We don’t lose heart.” I hope that you aren’t losing heart as you face life’s hardships. Paul reminds us that the difficulties of life provide an opportunity for inner, spiritual growth, as we are forced to rely on God’s grace to deal with them. And he also points out that these things are preparing us for the eternal life to come. We don’t always remember this, do we? And that’s OK, but at least for today, remind yourself that God is at work, sometimes in unseen ways, not only in spite of, but sometimes through your afflictions.

Let’s get back to our Navy pilot, lost at night in the dark over the sea. His name was Jim Lovell. He later commanded NASA’s ill-fated Apollo 13 mission, a mission that required every bit of strength and ingenuity the flight crew and ground crew could manage. As Jim reflected back on that dark night in 1954, he said that after all his cockpit lights went out, as he was near despair, he thought he saw a faint blue-green glow in the ocean below him. He remembered from his training that there were phosphorescent algae at sea that were activated when they were churned up, like by a ship’s propellers. So he followed those faint trails of bioluminescent dinoflagellates back to his ship, and was able to safely land. If his cockpit lights hadn’t shorted out, he never would have seen them. (And, if I hadn’t told this story, I would never have learned the phrase, “bioluminescent dinoflagellates!”)

Like Jim Lovell's experience when his cockpit lights shorted out, sometimes what appears to be a tragedy in our lives turns out to be an act of grace, to be for our own good. Clearly, it doesn't always seem that way. But God is still at work, even in the midst of our suffering. Like Paul and his fellow ministers, we are jars of clay- fragile, limited vessels in which God has entrusted the great treasure of his grace and love. We are never alone. And we must never stop sharing the treasure we've been given.