

The Most Precious Treasure

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[0 : 00] I wonder where you keep your most prized possessions. I'm certain that wherever you put it, you try to make it a safe place, the safest possible place that you can find or buy.

My country, Albania, placed its most prized possessions, which is the national treasure, in a forbidden mountain, in a tunnel, impregnable, with guards.

Nobody knew where it was. It was a state secret. And no one could get near to it without being shot. 24 years ago, however, we had the so-called troubles, just like in Ireland, where the state ceased to exist.

And at that moment, you know exactly what happened. 24 years ago, within the space of two days, the Albanian national treasure, a whole nation's wealth, was stolen, broken into, taken away.

The tunnel left an empty shell. What we are going to see today is that God does something counterintuitive. He stores his most valuable treasure in the unlikely of places, in plain sight, and in the most insignificant vessels.

[1 : 36] And yet, no one can steal it. No one can destroy it. Because of God's power. We are going to focus today in the letter that Apostle Paul sent to the Corinthians.

He had sent perhaps a series of letters, the first of which we know as 1 Corinthians. This is the 2 Corinthians. Perhaps the 2nd or the 3rd, and some say the 4th letter that is sent to them.

These were people that he had evangelized, he had brought to Christ himself a while ago. And we are going to focus in a different passage today.

I apologize for the miscommunication with Pastor Graham, but we are going to focus on verses 7 to 12. And we are going to see three things that Paul actually tells us about this treasure and its vessels.

And the first thing is simply this. What are we who believe in him? We are insignificant vessels of invaluable value.

[2 : 47] Insignificant vessels of inestimable value. And secondly, we are going to see proof for it. Paul gives us proof, and the proof is this.

Against all odds, you will resist. And thirdly, and finally, we are going to see the purpose of it all.

You will win, and others will gain. Let's go to verse 7. But we have this treasure.

Now, Paul says this treasure, so he must know what it is. He must have said what it is, and it does. Just a bit earlier, I will explain briefly. Just a few sentences earlier, he explains what the treasure is.

He explains it from the history of Moses. Moses, as you might know from the Old Testament, would go into this particular tent, sometimes daily, and he would speak with the Lord.

[3 : 46] And that was a very personal encounter. And because of that personal encounter with the Lord, which the Old Testament calls it face-to-face communication, after Moses would go out of the tent, his face would shine because of that glory that was the Lord's presence.

However, that glory would soon fade away from his face, so that the people would not be distracted, therefore, from his message. After he left the meeting, Moses would put a veil on his face until the glory disappeared.

And Paul says, look, there is a parable in this true story. And that is that the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, was only a foretaste of something much better, much bigger to come, of a lasting glory.

And that is, he said, Jesus Christ. However, when Jesus Christ came, many Jews still did not believe. The veil, he says, still remained on their eyes.

They are like blind people. And not only them, but even those who are not Jews and have heard the gospel and do not believe. A veil still remains on their faces, and he calls them, they are blind.

[5 : 00] Because there is a force in this planet, some people call it impersonal, and Christians call it personal, and that's called the devil. And he is the God of those who do not believe in the true God.

And he says, the only way that the blind can see the light is when they see the face of Christ. And he says, the face of Christ is actually the light that we have been waiting for to see.

The light of the knowledge of God's glory. And he says, that's the treasure. Now, it's a treasure that we carry to give to the world.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay. We are insignificant vessels. We are jars of clay. Now, Paul is playing a pun of words here because we people are made of earth, of earthen elements.

Now, in the period that Paul was living, as you may have seen, there were the so-called amphoras, the huge jars or the small jars in Corinth. And some of them were intricately decorated.

[6 : 18] They were beautiful sometimes. However, if they were made of clay, they were not made to last for long. That's why you had jars or vessels of silver or of other kinds of metal, bronze or even gold.

And the jars of clay were not the most important ones. They were not the ones where you would actually put all of your treasures in because they were easily broken. They wouldn't last and the treasure would spill or they would be easily taken away.

Now, we are jars of clay, Paul says. And that's where God has put his treasure. And the treasure, as I said, is a message about a person who represents God himself, and that's Christ.

And it's that person himself that we carry within us. And that will not be stolen away. And that is a message that, by the way, is against the culture of this world.

Because, just like back then and now, we are bombarded with different messages from the culture. Sometimes two disparate kind of messages.

[7 : 30] And one of them is this. It's all about you. It's all about your well-being. It's all about you. You are the most priceless treasure.

And you should take care of yourself. And that was the message, in a sense, that was, whether intentionally or not, in Paul's day, portrayed by the so-called sophists.

But not only them. It was a culture where the spectacular was celebrated. And you can see that in the first letter of Corinthians as well.

The Corinthians, even after coming to Christ, they were still very much part of their culture, in which they enjoyed listening to beautiful words. People who actually had the best rhetoric in the land, they would also be the most rewarded.

With success, with honor from all people. They were like the Hollywood actors of today. And they were also rich because of the patronage they received. Because, like crowdfunding today, if you have a convincing message, you get the most of money.

[8 : 35] And, of course, that was what a good leader should be like. Charismatic, nice-looking, rich, of good honor, of a good upbringing, good family.

And that's what they were seeking. This kind of glory, this kind of shine. And the other message was, again, disparate. And, again, we'll see that Paul actually speaks about it.

And that's stoicism, which has made quite a comeback today. And it's the opposite of the message of the culture that says, it's all about you.

The Stoics realized that life is tough. That life is chaos. And you have to somehow face it. And you can only do so bravely.

Because if you do it bravely, you give a good message not only to yourself, but also to those around you. And, after all, if this life is what all there is, even if there are gods, or perhaps even if there aren't gods, this life is all it is.

[9 : 37] So, you know what? Let's face the chaos of this life with the bravest way we can. That's the message of stoicism.

And Paul sees that both of these are flawed. And so, today, he starts by saying, we are insignificant vessels.

You are not the treasure. You are the pot. If you're a Christian, you're a vessel. You're not the priceless treasure.

You're an insignificant vessel. However, because of the treasure, we have this treasure. We have been given it. We are also of inestimable value.

Now, he says, we have all of this to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. Now, we can see why God is doing what he's doing.

[10 : 37] We can see why he's choosing the weakest of vessels. Because he's trying to make a point to the world. Whatever this gospel is, whatever this good news is, it only has power not because of me, the speaker, or you, the Christian.

It's because of God himself. So, the more insignificant and weak the vessel, the more everyone will know that this power is not from us.

It's from God. And he calls it an all-surpassing power, which in Greek is like hyperbole. Hyperbole, which actually would mean an incomparable power.

A power that cannot be defeated. And he gives proof for it.

Brother and sister, you're not the most prized possession in the world. Yet, you become one because of what you carry within you, this wonderful treasure.

[11 : 38] But you're not meant to carry this weight for yourself. And Paul gives a list of four theses and antitheses here.

Four examples. Four pieces of proof. That we are weak, but we are invincible because of God's power. We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed.

Verse 8. You can feel like, do you remember those movies? I mean, movies are always based on the worst nightmares of human experience. Because they actually happen in your life.

And in one of those movies, you see like the walls of a person who is seeking for a treasure. He gets into a pyramid or whatever. And suddenly, he makes a mistake. And the walls are closing in.

And there is no way to escape. And the adrenaline goes off the roof. And yet, he doesn't know what to do. We're like that. We're hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed.

[12 : 41] The first part is, we are insignificant vessels. We are weak. We are frail. We're human beings. Paul is not denying that. And by the way, Paul is talking about himself.

And he says, however, we are not crushed. Somehow, the strangest thing happens in Paul's life as he was speaking the word, as he was being persecuted, as he was being hated.

Somehow, he was not crushed. He was kept by the Lord. We're perplexed, but not in despair.

In Greek, these two words are very similar. And the idea is this, that we're perplexed. We're confounded. Somehow, we're not confounded. We're perplexed.

And yet, we're not in total despair. We are at a loss, but not at a total loss. I am at a loss, but I'm not a loser somehow. Now, this speaks to the sincerity of Paul about what he's going through.

[13 : 43] He's not lying about who he is. And the message of the Stoics was, we should find a way to kind of get an inner peace. They call it ataraxia, which is like an indifference in the face of everything that comes your way.

But Paul is saying, look, I'm perplexed. I do not deny this. As a Christian, don't you wonder about life often? Especially because you're a Christian.

Because we know that there is suffering, and yet there is a good God. And when you do the right thing, and somehow you still suffer, and you see the evil prosper, you still ask yourself the question, Lord, until when?

Or when you're faced with a difficult situation in your life, whether it is in your career, in your school, in your life, in your marriage, you at some point become perplexed.

What is going on here? Especially if I'm doing your work, O Lord. And yet, we're not lost. Somehow, we're not in total despair.

[14 : 53] But that's not because of Paul again. It is because of the all-surpassing power of God. Somehow, especially in your weakness, you see his strength.

And thirdly, persecuted, but not abandoned. A hunted animal. You can actually see it in your mind. A hunted animal, or a prey, or even a hunted human being who is fleeing from his executors.

Like the mob is trying to chase them, and that's what happened with the early Christians. They were trying to find Paul, get him, and get him killed. That is the picture that he was going through.

Thankfully, we're not going through that. However, as you, all of you here know, we're still persecuted to this day because of the treasure that is in us.

And somehow, I'm not abandoned, he says. And it's not a feeling. The first part is what you feel when you're persecuted. The second part is what God does.

[15 : 55] It's not because of Paul's courage. God does not abandon us. Struck down, but not destroyed. And you can easily see what Paul is talking about here.

Perhaps a wrestler who was thrown down on the floor. And when that normally happened, that was the end of the match. Or worse yet, it was the gladiators. Suddenly, you were struck down by your opponent.

You find yourself on the ground. And a few seconds later, as you hear the cheers from the crowd, as you see the thumb of the main person, it could have been the governor or the emperor, going like this, that was the end of you.

And that's exactly what we often feel in life, Paul says. We see the sword on our throat. But we are not destroyed.

Every single day, in our worst issues, problems, and difficulties, and suffering, somehow, we marvel at the fact that we're still here.

[17 : 06] We're still resisting against all odds. And it's not because of me. It's not because of you. It's because of the treasure we carry. And because of the power of God that keeps us, that cannot be destroyed by anyone or anything in the world.

So, can I tell you something, brothers and sisters? Do not fear if you feel insecure. If you feel that you don't have all the gifts to give to the world the best possible explanation of the gospel.

If you don't feel that your mind is strong enough to stand against a very smart opponent who is an atheist, for example, at your workplace.

Or if you just feel that you're too much of a sinner. Lord, I cannot do this. You say to yourself, Lord, I cannot do this. I feel myself as an imposter in your family.

I don't know why I'm standing. How can I speak to others? How can I live for you? Now, that's exactly what Paul is countering here. He is no Stoic philosopher.

[18 : 22] And that's exactly what he's saying. The Stoics would have said this. We are hard-pressed on every side, but invincible.

We are perplexed, but somehow courageous. We are persecuted, but unflinching. Struck down, but defiant.

That's not what Paul is saying. The first part is what we feel, what we live as human beings. The second part is what God does. So don't feel afraid of who you are, of the flaws you have, of the time in your life where you are right now and you feel that you're not doing what you can in your Christian life.

God chose you as a vessel to serve Him, to carry His treasure. And He chose you as an earthen vessel so that we can rely on Him, not on our power.

There is nothing to boast about us, nothing to boast about me, but there is everything to hope because of Him, because of His power, because in your worst weakness, He will show His strongest power and everyone will see it.

[19 : 40] I remember somebody saying once about a young man's sermon, that young man wasn't me, but it could have been me.

He said, His heart is not yet broken, something is missing. After he has suffered a while, he will have a message worth listening to. So don't worry if you're suffering.

Don't hide it. Don't be a stiff upper lip person. Don't pull yourself up from your bootstraps. That's not the Christian message. In fact, show who you are.

Show your weaknesses and say, it's not me, it's Him. He has kept me and He will keep you. And thirdly, you will win.

That's the purpose. And others will gain. We saw the proof that we are insignificant vessels and yet of inestimable value. That's why we are kept by God's power.

[20 : 41] And now we'll see the purpose. You will win in verses 10 to 12 and others will gain. There is a purpose in the pain and in suffering gain. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revered in our body.

For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake. And again, he repeats almost the same sentence with one exception. So that His life may also be revealed in our mortal body, in our mortal flesh.

The purpose of it all is not that you may feel miserable, that you may self-flagellate and show the world that you will suffer for Him and yet you will stand.

No, that's not the idea. Paul does not deny the reality of suffering in life, the chaos that your life is at different moments and sometimes constantly. But it tells us that God keeps us for a purpose that we will win.

But before He does that, He shows us again the dark side of life by taking the example of Jesus. He smartly uses some words that remind us of the story of Jesus.

[21 : 56] We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus. It's actually the word dying here. The word death is used just a verse later. The idea is that what He's trying to say is that daily we who are Christian carry within us the dying moments of Christ which is the final week, the week of passion, the week of His strongest trials.

When He was handed over, being given over to death, the word used is we're handed over to death just like He was. In that final week, Jesus was betrayed and handed over to death.

And secondly, He speaks not only about His passion but He speaks to Jesus' crucifixion. We always carry around in our body the death of Christ. That's what the pallbearers do to a dead person.

We Christians carry around the putrefying smell of a dead man. We carry Him from the cross to the grave. And thirdly, however, there is a purpose so that we may win.

We do this so that His life may also be revealed in our body. And that's His resurrection life. Jesus Christ had to suffer and be betrayed, had to die and be crucified.

[23 : 19] But then He rose again. Brothers and sisters, we who believe here carry within us not just a message but a person and a story, a living one.

We actually enact every single day, even in the midst of your weaknesses, you still enact to those around you the sufferings, the death, and the victory of Jesus Christ.

And they're not for the future. They're present realities. That's what He's saying here. Even though He does not deny that because they are present realities, they become future certainties.

Suffering is not a sign of God's disappointment, brother and sister. It is perhaps a divine appointment. And I don't just say this to say it.

I don't like suffering either, but none of us denies that we're going through certain kinds of suffering, even as we speak. But we know that we will win because Christ won.

[24 : 28] And we know that there is no easy fix. We have to go through the difficulties of life, but we also know we shall be undefeated because of the treasure we carry and the power God gives us.

We will win and others will gain. And we see that in verse 12. So then death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. Now, just to give the context again of what Paul is saying.

Paul loved the Corinthian Christians. They were like his sons and daughters because he had brought them forth by the power of the gospel some years earlier.

However, they did not like him because they still saw the epitome of great leadership with the eyes of their culture. And that was, like I said, you have to have a good appearance.

You have to know how to speak well. And Paul, they accused him in the same letter and Paul mentions it. They said, his appearance is nothing and his speech is of no account.

[25 : 32] How can we believe his word? He's nothing. He's not even rich and he does not even seek money from others and from us because he's nothing. Had he been somebody, he would have had a lot of patrons and a lot of money.

And Paul says, no. We go through whatever we go through not only so that we can win but that you can gain.

and all my sufferings are like those of a parent. Now, throughout this letter, if you go through it, you'll see that Paul calls himself a parent for them.

In fact, even a parent who is going to discipline them if they keep on doing what they're doing because he loves them to death. He has sacrificed himself for them. You know what we parents do.

Even if you're not a parent, you're somebody's child. You know that as a parent, you sacrifice everything for your children and you die daily for them.

[26 : 37] You die in small ways and in big ways. You die to your hobbies. Sometimes, had you had not a child, you'd have done something else as a hobby that weekend but yet, you have to take them to a football match.

Or, you die to your rest. If you want to sleep for an hour, well, you can't catch enough. And if you want to sleep through the night because it's so important that you go to work the next day to support that very child, you have to stay up all night.

And you suffer in small ways. You die to yourself every single day. And you die to your career because you want to give them a better future than yours.

You die to your dreams often because theirs are more important than yours. And then, as we well know, you're ready to die actually for them.

You don't even think about it if it's a difficult situation, even if you've never thrown a punch in your life. You turn into a mama bear or a papa bear when your child's life is in peril.

[27 : 54] You don't think twice about dying for them. And you don't do it because you're a hero. You do it because you're a parent.

Like, that's Paul. And that's us as Christians. He's willing to give it all, to sacrifice it all, to see that others, he's willing to see others see him down, struck down, pushed in a corner, openly perplexed, wondering what is going on.

because he knows that all of his troubles will actually bring forward the most absolute joy in his children, in his spiritual children.

And in the same way we, who suffer, when others see that we suffer and yet we stand, yet we resist against all odds, that's a way for them to actually think, wow, I want to do the same.

I want to do the same. I want to have the same as they're having. I remember, I will not tell the name here, but there is a wonderful Christian in Edinburgh and I heard this story.

[29 : 11] Recently his father died of a, of cancer, I think. And at the funeral, he said, throughout his life my father showed me how to live and recently he showed me how to die.

That's the Christian life because it starts with Christ. He was betrayed, handed over. He was willing to die. He was willing to sacrifice himself for us.

He is the face of God. and he died for me and you. He showed us how to live. He showed us how to die. And three days later, he was back alive, never to die anymore.

That is a promise that if I showed you how to live and I showed you how to die, you know that now I can show you how to live again and never die again.

that's why we are willing to bear the burden of being misinterpreted, of being hated, and sometimes of even losing the bid to the highest office in the land because we believe that there is something more important than an office.

[30 : 36] There is something more important than our dreams. There is something more important than our jobs. There is someone more important than ourselves. And when we grasp that person, Jesus Christ, we know that we are safe.

We actually haven't lost anything. You cannot keep something that is not yours, but others cannot take away from us what God has given us, eternal life.

And because we live and every single day we die to ourselves, we know that one day we are going to win the final battle. Do you feel any joy today, brother and sister?

Do you feel any love? Do you feel any relief in your troubles? That's all from God, but you know what? It's only a foretaste, a preparation of what is to come.

It is like a rehearsal, a small rehearsal of what we'll see one day when Christ returns. until then we have to hold on, not to ourselves, but to Him, because we are indeed insignificant vessels, and yet because of the treasure we are of inestimable value.

[31 : 53] And there is proof for that every single day you suffer in many different ways, and God still keeps you. Against all odds you stand and resist. And the purpose is that we will win.

That's why we're willing to sacrifice everything. And even if we're not willing to sacrifice anything, it will happen, and yet we shall not lose.

The Lord is going to pick us up again, and we shall win, and others will gain. Because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself.

Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed, day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. Because what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

[33 : 01] Oh, Lord, we are weak. We cannot enact in our own lives the life sufferings death of Jesus Christ. But we know that we are strong in you because of the treasure we carry.

Lord, make the people see what is in us and may they come to you. Even those of us this morning here who do not believe, open their eyes, Lord, that they may see Christ himself and may believe.

Life will not get easier for them. It will get even worse sometimes because they're Christian and they will represent Christ in the world, but however, they're winners because of him and one day we shall all be resurrected with when Jesus returns, never to die again.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.