

Treasure in Jars of Clay

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[0 : 00] Well, morning, everyone. Do come with me back to this passage, 2 Corinthians chapter 4. Let me just reread to us verse 7. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. So here's what I think is the hardest question to answer in a job interview. See if you agree.

3. What would you consider to be your weaknesses? Now, what on earth do you do with that? Because we don't know what to do with that, what we do is we take a question that really, when you boil it down, is all about showing self-awareness. And what we do is we subtly turn it into a little bit of self-promotion, don't we? So my friends say, I'm too honest. Do they?

Great. I work too hard. I'm a perfectionist. I'm committed to going the extra on my own. Have you ever wondered why we have a hard time admitting weaknesses? I imagine it's to do with the fact that as a culture, we celebrate the impressive, right? Anthem of my childhood growing up, I get knocked down, but I get up again. You're never going to keep me down, right?

Those 90s songs that made you ask the deep questions of life. We go nuts for that narrative, don't we? The student who started their start-up company, and then they sold it for millions, and is now doing the TED Talk circuit. The basketball player who defied all the odds to make it to the top of the NBA. The couple from Rotherham who appeared on Homes Under the Hammer because they bought a property auction. They did it up, and now they're selling it for a five-figure profit. That's the stuff that Disney and Netflix and the BBC make biopics of, isn't it? Here's the thing. Success stories sell. And as we get back into this letter today, here's what we're going to see.

That what God says is glorious, and what the world thinks is impressive are two very different things.

[2 : 15] So here's the invitation. Come and bring your weakness to this passage. Come and bring your struggles. Come and bring your sufferings. Come and bring your fears. Come and bring your sin.

Come and bring your ordinary looking life. Come and bring your emotions, and allow God to tell us where real lasting glory in this life is to be found. Because the thing is, success stories sell in this city of Corinth as well. This booming port city, a little southwest of Athens. If you're into geography and into maps like me, you'll love getting into that. Find Corinth on the map, giving you a little clue, right? It's a city that's just a melting pot of all sorts of different peoples. It's a city where money and pleasure and making a name for yourself are the name of the game.

This is Benidorm and Manhattan rolled into one. One commentator described the city of Corinth like this. He says, Corinth was a city with a Roman face, a Greek heart, a large Jewish minority, and get this, and a deeply ingrained universal desire to impress.

And like osmosis, that whole success stories sell scent, how about that for alliteration, that's pungent all over Corinth, is beginning to waft its way into the church as well.

These false teachers who are playing to the Corinthian crowds, right, with their impressive looking lives and words. It's like Ant and Decker hosting an episode of Corinth's Got Talent every week when they gather. They're saying there's no wiggle room for weakness in the Christian life.

[4 : 15] And what Paul is writing to do is to try and convince the people in this church, who he loves so dearly, he's trying to convince them not to buy it. And instead embrace the genuineness of him and his pattern of ministry, a life that's modeled on and being conformed to the crucified and the resurrected Jesus. And what we arrive at today is one of the most powerful and liberating metaphors to describe the Christian life that you will find anywhere in Scripture. Ready for a big claim?

Here's the claim. You get this, and it really does have the power to change your life. And to get it, imagine that we're back in that job interview.

And imagine Paul's the one in the seat. Paul's the one getting grilled. And the question comes, doesn't it? Paul, describe yourself in three words. What does he say? Verse 7. Describe yourself in three words.

He says, jar of clay. As my American pals would say, let's riff on that metaphor for a little bit. Okay. What is a jar of clay? Right. In the first century Roman world, a jar of clay was just an everyday fragile container that was used to transport all sorts of goods across the length of the empire. Oil, wine, documents, valuables. I guess today the equivalent might be the cardboard box that your Amazon package comes in.

Okay. Because think about it. The last time you received an Amazon package in the post, here's a question. How long did you spend looking at the box?

[6 : 20] Could you even know who made the box? Me neither. But it's a metaphor. If we press into it a bit more, it's a metaphor that precisely counters the Corinthian obsession with impressiveness. Doesn't it?

Counters it. And yet, friends, it's into these jars that represent broken, fragile, fearful, unimpressive people like us. With all sorts of struggles, with all sorts of baggage, with all sorts of issues, with all kinds of limitations, with all kinds of ailments.

We are the place that God by his spirit, see the text, has put the treasure of his gospel. It's not about being impressive on the outside. It's all about the treasure that God has placed on the inside. Jar of clay. All I'm wanting to convince us of this morning is to embrace that jar of clay model of life. What Paul does, he gives us two big reasons why he embraces that metaphor. We're going to look at them together, and then from those two big reasons, I've just got two real quick questions to ask us as we flesh out the application, what it's going to look like in our lives this week.

[7 : 52] Okay? Now, here's the first reason that Paul embraces a jar of clay existence. In the text, it's because he knows, as he does it, who is being revealed.

So come with me to verse 10 to 12 and see how does Paul describe his life. How did he describe it? It's three times you get it.

It's death-shaped. And to flesh that out, he tells the Corinthians how life is going. And he's not winning at life, is he?

Verse 8 and 9, what does he say? Just take these in. He's hard-pressed. This is how life is going right now. He's persecuted. He's perplexed.

He's struck down. Verse 16, outwardly, he is wasting away. So life has taken its toll on his physical body. That's what he's saying.

[8 : 50] And that suffering is coming as a direct result of his pursuit of Jesus. As he walks the narrow road and as his life goes right against the grain of the world, its values and its logic.

And yet, here is why he keeps going. Verse 10, because he knows as he does it, he is revealing the life of Jesus.

Do you see how the word death there comes up three times? And yet, the word life comes up there three times as well. Here's what I think he means. When people look at him and they see him go through this stuff and yet he's not crushed.

Do you see his language there? He's not in despair. He's not abandoned. He's not destroyed. That he's no social jogger. He only puts on his sneaks and gets out there when it's nice outside.

He's really into this. They look at him and they say, what on earth keeps that guy going? There's no circumstantial reason why he's still plodding on.

[9 : 54] How do you explain it? And the answer is that God is both sustaining and with him through it all.

And yet, incredibly, it's not despite, but through Paul's unimpressive life and the words that accompany it, that people are becoming Christians.

And so people put those two things right next to each other on the table. People becoming Christians, Paul's unimpressive life. And they cannot square that circle.

And yet, the only conclusion that they can reach is that people are becoming Christians and it's nothing to do with Paul's impressive life.

What is it to do with? It's to do with the fact that the treasure, it's power, the power of the message through the work of the Spirit. That's the treasure that's helping people become Christians.

[10:57] Jar of clay is revealing Jesus. Just park it for the application at the end for our lives, okay? His unimpressive life is revealing Jesus.

Second reason is because he knows what's up ahead. What does he know, verse 14? What's ahead of him? The resurrection from the dead.

When his suffering and his trials will be over. When his physical body will be made new. Glorious truths. But the real wonder of it is that God, he says, will present us with you to himself.

He gets God. You could even say that's where his story really begins.

And so with that in mind and with his eyes fixed there, do you see how Paul does? He just contrasts two things. Firstly, he contrasts what is going on outwardly.

[12:04] His body, it's wasting away. Contrasted to what's going on inwardly. The new him in Christ. That person who is growing in love for Jesus.

Is being conformed more to Jesus by the Spirit. It's happening all the time. Outwardly he's wasting away. Inwardly he's being renewed day by day.

I think this is kind of like, remember those expanding sea creature toys that you used to put in the bath when you were young? Started off small. You put it in. What happened? Is it just grew and grew and grew and grew.

And that's what's happening inwardly in Paul's life. He's growing. That's the first contrast. The second contrast.

And get this, this is wonderful. Is between what's temporary and what's eternal. What's time limited and what's forever.

[13:04] Paul knows this life and what he's going through now is temporary. Now you've got to see what he calls it in verse 17. With all the pastoral sensitivity in the world as a man who is going through all of these things.

What does he call it? He calls it a light and momentary struggle. Now he doesn't deny that these are troubles.

You've got to see that. He doesn't deny that these are troubles. But it's as if Paul would take us by the hand and take us all the way to the children's swing park.

And he would take us to the seesaw. And what he does is he puts the hardships and the sufferings that we go through in this life on one end. And he puts eternal glory.

Being in the presence of the God that we love on the other end. And he says it's like putting a fully grown sumo wrestler on one end and a tiny child on the other.

[14:08] There just is no competition. Compared to what's next. What we are suffering now he says will shrink and pale into the background.

And even more than that. So sovereign and good is this God. That it's not despite these things. But it's through these things. That God is achieving this inner renewal thing in Paul's life.

He's a jar of clay. So here's the two questions for us as we begin to think about this specifically.

And how it might apply to our lives. Here's question number one friends. Do some of us need to embrace our limits? Do some of us need to lean into this morning harder.

This jar of clay existence. Can I hit you with some facts? Fun facts I learned this week. I'm sure someone will correct me on this one. But give me grace.

[15:14] Okay. Did you know that over 60% of your body is water? Try not to look at any medics in the room. And did you know that the metabolical value of your body.

If you boiled it all down. Took it to the marketplace. And said what price I can get for this. Do you know that you wouldn't even have enough to buy two flat whites? There's a conversation starter next time you go to Costa.

Right? Friends you and I are made of dust. And yet the joke is that too often we feel like we need to run around like headless chickens.

Justifying our worth. And our world doesn't it that values busyness. Our world values busyness and it equates that busyness with importance.

What are we so often tempted to do? To push the limits. But here is an invitation to embrace the limits.

[16:15] Are you not so glad that God through the pen of Paul picked that metaphor? All sorts of metaphors he could have picked. But he picked this one.

Can I suggest that that is hugely good news for us this morning? Is it not so freeing to know that the name of the game is not be awesome for Jesus so that others will think he's awesome too?

No, it's to reveal to people through our jar of clay lives. Because the treasure is in us, friends. God turns our weaknesses into his opportunities. Know that when we respond to everyday trials, big or small, in faithful ways.

When people look at you and say, there's something bigger going on in their lives that's making them tick. And I don't quite get it. Know that in those moments that you are revealing the life of Jesus.

[17 : 30] Students, see, I know many of you are coming to the final lap. See when your friends can see that you're not panicking about the upcoming finishing line. And what happens after that.

I remember what it was like. Everyone else freaking out. What are we going to do after we're finished? See when people can see that you're not. Because they know that you trust a God who knows the end from the beginning.

And has good works prepared in advance for you to do. Who is holding you. And your life is more than grades and jobs. See when people can see that. Can I encourage you not to underestimate what God can do through that.

Those of us right now who are facing or staring down the barrel of unemployment or redundancy. When people can see that you face those things.

And your world isn't falling apart. As we begin to get older and our bodies break down. I'm now at this stage when I get on my knees to change a nappy.

[18 : 25] I get down on my knees and I think, what else can I do when I'm down here? Because it takes such an effort to get up. But when people see our bodies beginning to break down. As we age. And this is why sports players have such a hard time when they retire.

We live our lives in such a way that people can see that our identity was never wrapped up. Primarily with our appearance or our abilities. Or what we did for a job. It's always been in something way more lasting and satisfying.

That will never fade. When people look at you funny. Because you've got convictions. Loving convictions about sexuality, gender, beginning of life, end of life issues.

And they wonder why you would hold those views when everyone else disagrees with you. When you're willing to take the hit because of Jesus. Your love for him and your trust in his word. Friends, you will be a walking question mark in the eyes of the watching world.

That you are not crushed. When hard times come. That we are not despairing. We are not abandoned by our God. Friends, when we do those things.

[19 : 36] We are revealing the life of Jesus. Where is God calling you right now? Where is the spirit putting his finger on in your lives? Friends, where we need to embrace our limits.

Here's the second question. Do some of us need to expand our horizons? We live in a quick fix world, don't we?

Where you can get easily duped into confusing the immediate and the lasting. We want that sugar hit. Right? What is it about sugar? It mentally tricks you into thinking that you're full when actually you're empty.

And instead of going for something that is more lasting, what do we do? We just want another hit. You know, our kids over Christmas, they went to granny's and they built a gingerbread house.

And they smothered all over it sugar, icing, rainbow laces, little stars, jelly tots. Didn't even know jelly tots were still going.

[20 : 36] And they brought it home. And it's almost as if Paul is saying here, do you see how much of life is just covered in sugar coating? It makes you think you're full, but actually it will leave you empty.

So much of the things that we chase in this life are covered in sugar. And it's as if Paul drags us to see that we need to be playing the long game. Don't take the quick hit.

Play the long game. Something way more satisfying, something way more lasting is on offer. Can I just say this is going to be particularly special to you if you're going through a really hard time.

To know that there is a sell-by date to your suffering. And is Jesus not our wonderful example of patience? Patience with people.

Patience in circumstances. Patience in suffering. To the extent that for the joy before him, he would endure the cross. Because Jesus was patient.

[21 : 41] Because he had his eyes fixed on lasting things. Friends, he saves us by his death on the cross and he invites us into that life. Paul is fixing his eyes on eternal things.

Know from this passage, friends, if your trust is in Jesus, then resurrection is your future. And because of that, Paul thinks about the inner man.

And the question comes to his friends, what are we doing to sow inwardly? You know, when I was a student during my summers, I used to work at the front of a bank.

And they trained you to ask every single customer two questions. Here was question number one.

How would you like your cash? Remember those days, friends, of physical money?

Remember when they had the audacity to make you stand at an ATM and enter your digits so that you would get the money? Do you remember physical money? Great days. Ask the person, how would you like your money?

[22 : 47] 10, 20, 30, 50, but how would you like your money? Second question, would you be interested in speaking to one of our team about increasing your savings? And here was the subtext of that question.

We want you to be investing yourself here. And as if God is inviting us to do exactly that, do you see it? Investing ourselves in the things that are unseen, that are glorious and eternal.

Are we investing ourselves there? Seriously, that's what we do every time we pick up our Bibles.

Don't know if you've ever thought about it like that. It is an investment as we spend time in God's Word, getting these promises into our head and our heart.

It is an investment in the things that are unseen. I always love how Augustine, church father from years ago, talked about the Bible. He talked about it and he said that the Holy Scriptures are our letters from home.

I love that. The Bible is our letter from home. Sowing. Sowing inwardly. Sowing to the things that will last.

[24 : 00] Sowing to the things that are unseen. Sowing to the things that are eternal. Sowing to the things that are eternal. And so here is Paul's conclusion. Verse 16. And it's the one that he started with at verse 1 that kind of bookends this chapter.

He said, I do not lose heart. You know, just as we close, let me tell you about a girl who was part of this church family years ago called Joanna.

Some of you remember Joanna and Bobby when they were here. Joanna was a community nurse. Remember one of the patients that she visited regularly in his care home was a man called Derek Prime.

Derek Prime used to be the pastor at Charlotte Chapel for many, many years. And when he got older, when his body was fading away, his family moved him to a care home so he could get the help that he needed.

And Derek Prime was one of those people who had died during COVID and had a handful of people at his funeral. But Joanna remember telling me the story that when he died, Joanna put it on the WhatsApp group with all her colleagues.

[25 : 04] They used to have a big WhatsApp group and they just contributed things. Either she, I think she put it on or somebody else put it on, on the WhatsApp group. And she said, I didn't think anyone would notice. And all of a sudden, one by one, her colleagues come back with stories of this man.

And the things that he'd said, the things that he'd pointed out when they used to care for him in his room. Apparently, he had the nickname as the old man who always loved to sing.

Always used to love to sing hymns in the morning when people used to come to visit him. He used to explain the hymns, where they came from, and said, would you like me to read to you?

Gave them a tract. He was the man who always loved to sing. Friends, if the scriptures are our

letters from home, are not the songs that we sing, the anthems that we sing as we get there?

This man used to love to sing. One of his favorites, and many of us will remember this old hymn.

And it really is wonderful. How sweet the name of Jesus sounds. How sweet the name of Jesus sounds.

[26 : 12] In a believer's ear, it soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds, and drives away our fear. It makes the wounded spirit whole and calms the troubled breast.

Tis manna to the hungry soul and to the weary rest. Do you know what my new ambition in life is?

To finish like that. A jar of clay that lives to reveal the treasure that God has put within.

Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. And the words of Hebrews chapter 12.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

[27 : 19] For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

And so, Father, I pray today that you would simply lift our eyes to the things that are eternal. Help us, Father, to be people who live for the things that are yet to be revealed.

Lord, help us to invest in the things unseen. Lord, by your Spirit, right now, Father, would you be bringing comfort to those of us who need to be comforted?

Would you be bringing challenge to those of us who need to be challenged? Would you be bringing that confidence, Lord, to those of us who are perhaps doubting? We thank you, Lord, for a glorious gospel.

And so, Father, we pray that you would be with us as we finish our time together. Help us fix our eyes on Jesus, we pray. Amen.