



The Plenty of Empty #4: 2 Cor. 4:7-15

Treasures in Clay Jars

July 23, 2023

Text

7 But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8 We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, 9 persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, 10 always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 11 For we who are living are always being handed over to death for Jesus's sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us but life in you. 13 But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and therefore we also speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and will present us with you in his presence. 15 Indeed, everything is for your sake, so that grace, when it has extended to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

First Reading

1. **What stands out to you in this text? What catches your attention?**
2. **What makes you say, "Yes!" or "What?!" or "Hmm ... I wonder"?**

Deeper Reading¹⁴

¹⁴ Judith Diehl, *2 Corinthians* (The Story of God Bible Commentary) (Zondervan, 2020); C. G. Kruse, C. G., *2 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (InterVarsity, 1987); Ernest Best, *2 Corinthians Interpretation* (John Knox, 1987); N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians* (Westminster John Knox, 2003).

1. "The treasure is the gospel message of redemption and reconciliation through Jesus Christ. It is a singular noun, indicating that the 'treasure' is one particular thing that is of great worth and value. The precious, glorious gospel exists in contrast to the 'knowledge' or 'wisdom of the world' that the Corinthians thought was so important before they came to believe in Christ (see 1 Cor. 1:18-25). Paul's use of this word 'treasure,' reminds us of a parable taught by Jesus [Matt. 13:44-46: 44 *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.] (Diehl, 170-171)*
2. **Do you often think of Jesus or the good news about Jesus as a "treasure"? Why/ why not?**
3. "'Treasure' and the 'jars of clay' (4:7) were familiar images in the Greco-Roman, Corinthian culture; in addition these pictures were familiar to the readers of the OT. In the first century AD, items of great value were often kept in clay jars simply because such jars were so unobtrusive and inconspicuous; they attracted no attention by their outward appearance. It was not unusual for people to wrap a valuable treasure in a piece of old cloth and bury it in a secret place, since there were no banks for safety deposit boxes in those days. 'Clay jars' or 'earthenware vessels' were not just common; they were *very* common. Hundreds of years after they were deemed useless, countless shards, pieces, and whole items of pottery have been discovered in archeological digs all over the Middle East." (Diehl, 171-172).
4. **Describe a "treasure" you've seen before. What was it kept in? Why?**
5. "In the Greco-Roman culture, the physical body was frequently described as a 'container' or 'vessel' for 'the mind or soul' of the person. Such a vessel 'wears out, grows old, dies, and is dissolved,' thus appearing to be inferior like an earthenware pot. It is remarkable that God chose to put the treasure of his gospel message in the hearts of fallible, cracked, chipped, and fragile human beings." (Diehl, 172).
6. *3 So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. 4 The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. 5 Then the word of the Lord came to me: 6 Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. (Jer. 18:3-6).*
7. **How would you finish this sentence: Seeing myself as a "clay jar/ vessel" makes sense to me because I _____.**
8. "Paul goes on to say that God wants to demonstrate *his* power, in contrast to the power of human beings (2 Cor. 4:7). Paul recognizes the total insufficiency of human

instruments, but he also acknowledges God's total sufficiency to achieve his purposes through his servants ... Paul is very aware of the irony: it is unusual, and remarkable, that a committed Jew, a persecutor of Christians in Jerusalem, would be chosen as the instrument by which the gospel message of Jesus Christ would be conveyed to the Gentiles." (Diehl, 175).

9. **In what ways have you seen this to be true: "so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us?"**
10. "Paul admits that, in their human fallibility and insufficiency, it was not easy for him and his fellow missionaries to carry the gospel into Gentile territory. However, their trials confirm to the reader that Paul was able to accomplish what God asked him to do. Paul uses a familiar literary strategy called 'catalog of hardships' in 4:8-9 to demonstrate his hardships and afflictions. This literary strategy is repeated again in this letter (see 6:4-10; 11:23-28; 12:10) and in other Pauline letters (Rom. 8:35-39; 1 Cor. 4:8-13; Phil. 4:11-12) ... This list is composed of four balanced antitheses, all written grammatically as participles. The first word of each pair of words states a human weakness, while the second word (following the 'but not ...') illustrates divine power (from v. 7). In each case, the second element is more extreme or more forceful than the first." (Diehl, 175).
11. **"Hard pressed"** (v. 8) is 'to cause something to be constricted or narrow; to crowd; to cause to be troubled, oppressed, afflicted.' ... Picture the image of a wrestler, crushed by an opponent in a headlock ... Yet Paul never felt himself being **'crushed'** or restrained. Even in crushing circumstances, Paul found that he always had an escape.' (Diehl, 175-176)
12. **"Perplexed"** (2 Cor. 4:8) is 'perplexity or anxiety' from a verb that denotes 'to be in a confused state of mind, to be at a loss, to be in doubt, uncertainty.' ... Even so, Paul was not **'in despair'**; again, he employs a word that was first used in 1:8 ... He has used an interesting pair of words to describe his state of mind; if the first word is 'to be at a loss, uncertain,' then the second word implies an advanced state of completely having no hope. While the second word is more intense than the first, it is rather difficult to accurately express this pair in English ... Harris points out that Paul is using a play on words here, and says this is 'to be at a total loss, but not lost.'" (Diehl, 176)
13. "The word **'persecuted'** (v. 9) is used to express harassment, 'especially because of one's beliefs.' It can imply aggravation 'to the point of death,' which is in keeping with Paul's words in 1:8-9 ... The other word in this pair is **'abandoned'** or **'forsaken'** (2 Cor. 4:9); it is a compound word derived from a root word that implies 'to leave something behind,' especially a place or a person.' This word appears in the Greek OT reference to the promises of God, who pledged, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you ...')see Deut. 31:6-8). (Diehl, 176).

14. “The last two words (2 Cor. 4:9) both have a broad range of meaning, making it difficult to limit each term to one particular kind of difficulty. ‘**Struck down**’ or ‘cast down’ means ‘to strike with sufficient force so as to know down, or throw down.’ In the passive form, it implies the blow of someone else on the victim. While Paul may have been knocked down, he was not permanently destroyed. Then, he used the word ‘**perishing**’ (v. 9), which implies ‘to cause or experience destruction, to perish, to ruin.’ ... During his life and ministry, Paul may have been ‘knocked to the ground, but he was not permanently grounded.’” (Diehl, 177).
- 15. Which of these four pairs means the most to you? Why?**
16. “The affliction, perplexity, et cetera, of verses 8-9 are rephrased as ‘carrying in the body the death of Jesus’ and ‘being given up to death for Jesus’ sake.’ Paul’s thought progresses naturally here for the treasure of Jesus was also in a cheap earthenware vessel--his human existence. There he had been afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, struck down ... In all the ways that Jesus was afflicted we see his dying (e.e., ‘death’; Paul uses here a word that describes a process rather than the single event of the crucifixion). Jesus’ dying went on all through life.” (Best, 41).
17. “We expect Paul now to go on and say ‘You should be finding the same in yourselves.’ Instead, he introduces a new and surprising contrast: ‘death is at work in us, but life in you’ (v. 12). ... Paul’s dying is not for himself but for them. Is it not logical that if Christ’s dying can mean so much for us, Paul’s dying and our dying should also mean something for others and bring life to light in them?” (Best, 43).
- 18. How has the suffering of someone else led to life for you? How has your suffering led to life for others?**
19. “The conclusion to his list is Paul’s recognition of what it meant to share in Christ’s suffering through his own trials and afflictions (4:10). Again, his use of antithesis (‘death and life’) in verses 10-12 is very striking. That is, mortal, perishing humanity carries around (4:10) the immortal life of the resurrected Jesus. Paul traveled many miles as a missionary carrying around his physical belongings as well as his mental burdens and emotional scars. Yet he always carried with him the presence and the power of the resurrected Jesus.” (Diehl, 177-178).
20. “In v. 13, Paul quotes from Psalm 116:10, emphasizing the fact that faith in Jesus leads to testimony about him.” (Diehl, 178).

Take Away

What is one thing you take away from this text for this week?

Next Text: Living by Dying (5:11-14)