

2 Corinthians 4:7

Treasure in Earthen Vessels — The Surpassingness of the Power

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:7–18

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassingness of the power may be of God, and not from us — every way afflicted, but not straitened; seeing no apparent issue, but not entirely shut up; persecuted, but not abandoned; cast down, but not destroyed — always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered unto death on account of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh; so that death works in us, but life in you.

And having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, I have believed, therefore have I spoken, we also believe, therefore also we speak; knowing that he who has raised the Lord Jesus shall raise us also with Jesus, and shall present us with you. For all things are for your sakes, that the grace abounding through the many may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.

Wherefore we faint not; but if indeed our outward man is consumed, yet the inward is renewed day by day. For our momentary and light affliction works for us in surpassing measure an eternal weight of glory, while we look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen; for the things that are seen are for a time, but those that are not seen are eternal.”

The Surpassingness of the Power

Everything exists for the pleasure of God — that comes out very strongly in the revelation of Scripture. In chapter 4, the expression that arrests the mind is “the surpassingness of the power” — that this is accomplished in that which is so weak. Earthen vessels are very easily shattered. And there has got to be more than the vessel: this power surpasses what is in it.

We read of the surpassingness of God’s power again in Ephesians 1, where God has put it forth toward us — the power that was wrought in raising Christ from the dead. This surpassing power is greater than God’s creatorial power. Creation power, as Romans 1 shows, displays his Godhead and his divinity — we are awed by the staggering energy that exists in the universe. But creation does not tell us what God is morally. What God is in himself in his nature comes out in connection with such things as this: this great treasure being in the earthen vessel is showing the surpassingness of his power. When Romans says that Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, Mr. Kelly explains that this means everything that morally animates the Father was brought into action in raising Christ from the dead. That involves what God is, not just his creative power. The spiritual sphere is the arena for the display of God in his nature — and that is surpassing power.

The new creation is greater than the old creation. The earthen vessels are connected with the old creation; the treasure is connected with the new. Our bodies belong to the old creation — they wear out, decay, and are only for a short period. But the treasure is eternal.

Gideon’s Pitchers — The Lamps Within

It is difficult to read verse 7 without thinking of Gideon. In Judges 7:16, he divided his 300 men into three companies and put a trumpet in every man’s hand with empty pitchers, and lamps within the pitchers. They came to the outside of the camp in the beginning of the middle watch, blew the trumpets, and broke the

pitchers — holding the lamps in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands, crying, “The sword of the Lord and of Gideon.” And all the host ran and fled. The cost was 301 pitchers. But the important part was the lamps inside them. The idea was that the light would shine — and the value of the pitcher was nothing compared to the importance of the light.

Light exposes things: it shows what is wrong to be wrong and what is right to be right, as God’s Word does. The important thing is the light, and the treasure is connected with the light. It is called a treasure in our chapter, and there is something especially precious to remember about it: it is not our estimate of the treasure, but God’s estimate of Christ, that is the treasure — and that is infinitely higher than our evaluation of him, however much we appreciate him. When we have that sense in our souls of God’s estimate of Christ, it sets our hearts upon himself, and our own appreciation of him grows accordingly.

The treasure is the light of verse 6: God who caused the light to shine out of darkness has shined in our hearts, “for the shining forth of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” This light is not a little flash that lasts a moment — it shines and shines and shines, and never stops. And God is both the initiator and the sustainer of it: he initiated it and he carries it through all the way until the Saviour comes for us.

The Power Not of Us — God’s Sovereign Work

Verse 7 ends by saying the surpassingness of the power is of God, and not of us. Christians need to learn this — we have no resource in ourselves for this. This is God’s work. So if one were to meet a so-called Christian counsellor who had a recipe for what we could do to make the light shine brighter inside our own hearts, we would know at once that is not what we have in this verse. The surpassingness of the power is not of us. Self-encouragement, pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps, self-directed activities with self as the object — none of

these are any substitute for the light that comes from the power of God. The more men work at it and strive, the less opportunity there is to hear the voice of God through his Word and have what is described here. Advice that explains carefully how to strengthen the walls of the earthen vessel thus blocks the light.

Not Straitened, Not Shut Up

Verses 8 and 9 give four contrasting pairs. Darby's translation has: "every way afflicted, but not straitened." The word straitened means narrowed. Affliction naturally narrows the heart — how wide is the love of God, and to what extent does the gospel have application? The answer is, God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. But let some trouble come, and ask again how far the gospel goes — one may find that it no longer quite reaches to the person who is troubling them at that moment. That would be to be straitened. But the apostle says, afflicted every way, but not straitened — meaning, in spite of all the circumstances, the largeness of heart and the scope of the gospel remain exactly as they ought to be. The grace of God goes forth just as widely as ever; it has no boundaries.

Seeing no apparent issue, but not entirely shut up: we came into circumstances where there was no apparent way out, but the way is not entirely shut up because God has his hand over the thing. His support has not been exhausted, his ways in using the vessel for testimony are not spent. If one cannot go forward, backward, right, or left — one can still shine. If there is treasure in the earthen vessel, the treasure can shine. Having done all, just to stand — that is itself testimony.

Bearing About the Dying of Jesus

Always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus — this is evidently a reference to the cross and what man gave to the Lord Jesus. Yet it was in the divine purpose that he should go to the cross, both to glorify God in vindicating

his nature and majesty, and to provide the righteous basis for God to be just when he justifies the sinner. The cross is the end of things here — what the world afforded him. And we are to bear about in our body the dying of Jesus.

This is not a matter of physically carrying the dead Lord Jesus. It is the moral power of what the cross means for the glory of God and the blessing of man. Wherever the natural man craves some place or some thing in this world, when the cross is brought to bear on that craving, it comes to nothing — because we are crucified to the world by the cross. That is the doctrine of Scripture. So bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus is the end of all seeking this world. And hence the injunction of 1 John: love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.

Life and death are connected in Scripture. Life feeds upon death — that is stamped into nature. We who ate today fed on something that was dead. When we come to the spiritual sphere, this finds its great exposition in the cross: the moral power of the Lord's death is applied to us that the life of Jesus might shine out. And what is supposed to shine out is not self. When the Lord said in John 6 that except a man eat his flesh and drink his blood he has no life in him — he was speaking of the appropriation of his death. The blood poured out signifies death has taken place. Life feeds on death. The Christian feeds upon that death and has life.

The Christian in the World — Not at Home

For we who live are always delivered unto death on account of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be manifested in our mortal flesh — mortal means subject to death. Yet in such a condition as we are in now, all of this can shine out. When a human being is confronted with death, what is inside comes out — with great reality. For the believer, what is supposed to come out is not courage or cowardice or fear. It is Jesus. That is not natural — and that is why the power has

to be of God. As long as we carry about the dying of Jesus in our bodies, we will find ourselves so contrary to the course of this world that there is an upstream struggle, and we will feel it.

This world is not the Christian's home. We are pilgrims and strangers here, in this place temporarily with the treasure in the earthen vessel to shine, awaiting his coming to take us to be with himself. The Father's house, where the Lord Jesus is, is characterized by what God is in himself: God is light, God is love. He has given us a nature suitable to that place — we are partakers of the divine nature. We were once darkness; now we are light. We are made fit to share the inheritance of the saints in light, and that place will be perfectly suitable to us because God has made it to be fit for his presence.

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassingness of the power may be of God, and not from us.