

# TREASURE CHESTS

By Steve Zeisler

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Father's Day and graduation week always call to mind thoughts about the future. In our studies in 2 Corinthians, we have noted that Christians, in the words of the old folk song, are "bound for glory." God indwells believers, who are being transformed from one degree of glory to another, reflecting, as they look at themselves in the mirror, the beauty of the Lord. As royal children, we have a great deal to look forward to. However, we too often allow ourselves to believe that we deserve unbroken happiness and security in this life as well as transformation into the likeness of Christ.

I want to offer you an object lesson this morning, a visual aid to use on this weekend in mid-June that offers a different perspective on the Christian life. I am holding a clay pot (made as an art project at school), given me by my ten-year-old son as a Father's Day gift. It's yellow on the outside and purple on the inside. It's lumpy and finger-marked, and made of ordinary material. It will probably end up on my dresser as a container for spare change. Visually, this clay pot is nothing to behold. In a sense, however, it speaks of my son's love, and thus it is very valuable to me.

## Jars of clay

An earthen pot is the figure of speech the apostle Paul turns to in 2 Corinthians 4, to which we come this morning. Chapter 4, verse 7:

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

This is the third wonderful figure of speech which Paul employs in these opening chapters of his letter. Earlier, he used the imagery of a fragrance that is invisible yet powerful. A fragrance is a wonderful illustration of how God uses us to influence others. Last week, we talked about the veil which Moses used to mask his fading glory. As Paul developed this theme we came to see that the veil is that which hides the truth from others and ourselves.

**God will give life to our mortal bodies in the same way he sustained and honored his own Son**

Today, we come to a third visual image, that of a clay pot. In the first century, containers were made from several types of materials. Stone vessels were made to last a long time. Others were made from gold or silver and were intended to have value in themselves. In the phrase we encounter here, "earthen vessels," the word that is in the emphatic position is the word "earthen-ness"-that which is ordinary or functional. This is the image that is drawn to teach us about ourselves. We are clay pots, designed to contain a very great treasure.

I want to make two points concerning verse 7. First, we should note the great difference between treasure and the common container that holds it. Too often we think of the Christian faith as something that is intended to make us impressive, to enhance us in the sight of others and in our own estimation. We attempt to make the pot itself more desirable, and thereby diminish the treasure. By doing so we are robbing God of the rightful appreciation that people should have of him.

The second point that the apostle makes here is that the all-surpassing power that transforms lives, that wields authority, that moves and changes history, is from God and not from us. Again, we often want authority to accrue to us. We want to direct others as to how they should act, to claim credit for bringing about blessing. We want power and beauty to be ours. But Paul insists in verse 7 that it is the treasure, not its container, that

should be valued, and the all-surpassing power be recognized as God's, not our own.

Some people today are enthralled with the notion of signs and wonders. This phenomenon comes around repeatedly throughout the history of the church (sometimes to correct a diminished emphasis on God's power). Believers get caught up trying to direct the authority of God toward miraculous events. But when we focus too much on miracles and dramatic displays from God, when we long for, expect and work at the miraculous, God ceases to be the one who is thanked. The minister, or the group which claims to be able to perform these things, becomes more and more important. The human vessels become more valued than the treasure.

The same thing can be true of good teaching that directs men and women toward wisdom. The wise counselor, or the effective Bible teacher, begin to delight us and we forget that it is the Lord who has used a very ordinary pot to bring forth truth.

The intention behind verse 7 is to correct our lack of humility. Power comes from God, not from us. Whatever else is true of us, we must learn to live our lives so that our Lord Jesus is more highly thought of and we are more out of the way.

### **The role of suffering**

How do we keep from overvaluing what is ordinary and undervaluing what is worthy? God uses suffering to accomplish this. It is the clear witness of scripture, from beginning to end, that God uses difficulty, restriction, pain, suffering and hardship to teach us important lessons. We would too easily forget our need for God if we did not have times of difficulty. In verses 8 through 15, we will hear a wonderful exposition on the importance of dying so that life results.

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. It is written, "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, 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 in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

Two words are used here to refer to the process of demise, one of which is best translated "death" (v.11), and the other "dying" (v.10), the process of losing one's life.

We are given over to death. Circumstances and events beyond our influence bring about the loss of that which was once filled with life. Our lives will be difficult, and we will suffer emotional anguish. We will be rejected and misunderstood despite our best efforts. Our bodies will deteriorate. Over time, we realize we are being given over to death, and there is nothing we can do about it. Relationships and friendships which used to be vital will die because of distance. A sad thing about growing up in this area is that many young people are forced to leave because it is too expensive to live here. People are lost to us as a result. There is no way to avoid it.

### **Jesus' example**

In addition to being given over, passively, to death, we actively "carry about the dying of Jesus," says the apostle. This is something we willingly choose. Paul recognizes that our Lord throughout his life chose to live with misunderstanding and not resist. He was willing to be subject to a process of dying all of his life long, not just the final hours of his life. In fact, the cross was unusual in the experience of the Romans for how quickly it ended. The executioners were surprised that Jesus died so quickly on the cross. The actual period of execution was relatively brief, but the dying process was the lifelong choice to put up with misunderstanding, to not fight back when he was hurt.

Jesus once said that the Son of Man, the Messiah, the Lord Creator, God incarnate, "had no place to lay his

head." What an astonishing statement, that the Lord Jesus himself had no place to lay his head! He would be ridiculed by those in rebellion against God, and misunderstood by members of his own family. He might have called legions of angels to do for him anything he chose to do, yet he never once did so. During the temptations in the wilderness, when Satan offered him glory without the cross, the kingdoms of the world at no price to him, offered to feed him in his hunger, Jesus refused. He carried about with him a willingness to not resist all the restriction, to not insist on his own way. Paul is saying that we must make the same choice lest the pot become too important and the treasure undervalued. We too must be willing to live with acceptance of the hard things that come our way, and not have revenge on those who harm us, expecting God to give life to our mortal bodies in the same way he sustained and honored his own Son.

Calvin and Hobbs, a six-year-old boy and his stuffed tiger, are comic strip figures. Last Sunday's comic strip showed the pair pushing a wagon up a steep, rocky hill. At the top they get in the wagon and begin a rapid descent. Calvin says to Hobbs, "Life is like typography, Hobbs. There are summits of happiness and success, flat stretches of boring routine, and valleys of frustration and failure. But I'm dedicating myself to experiencing only peaks. I want my life to be one never-ending ascension. Each minute of every day should bring me greater joy than the previous minute. I should always be saying, 'My life is better than I ever imagined it to be, and it can only improve. I'm going to jump from peak to peak. I'm...' And then they go careening over a cliff to the creek below. Hobbs says to Calvin, "At least with the flat places you don't have so far to go down." Calvin's rejoinder is to stick out his fist in the air while he is tumbling head over heels and say, "Only losers go down. For me it's only going to be up and up and up."

It is impossible, however, to avoid being given over to death. Nobody goes from peak to peak, each moment more joyful than the last. We have an option that is much wiser, one that Paul says will keep us valuing what is really valuable and avoid the exaltation of what is only a clay pot, and not intended to last. Real life is resurrection life, not the temporary making grand of what can only last for a short period.

### **Learning through suffering**

Let us look at the four statements of difficulty which Paul makes here: "hard pressed, but not crushed"; "perplexed, but not despairing"; "persecuted, but not abandoned"; "struck down, but not destroyed." "Hard pressed" has in mind a hemming-in of someone's experience. We find ourselves buffeted by life, the circle becomes tighter, the pressure becomes greater, and we anticipate being crushed, like a clay pot in a trash compacter. But the pressure is not too much to bear.

Charles Colson was once one of the most powerful men in the world. He was a key adviser to the President of the United States. He could go any where he wanted, and do anything he wanted. His decisions were acted upon, and shaped the course of history. But he did not learn where real power came from and what was really worth living for until he was in a jail cell, until his life became restricted and his world was hemmed in; then he began to see the heavens.

Secondly, says Paul, "we are perplexed, but not despairing." At certain times in our lives there is no way we can make sense of what is going on. We look at what is happening and say, "This is craziness. There cannot possibly be a good God in charge of this anymore. Either he has abandoned us or he has lost control." Why is it that those who are sensitive, humble, and want God's best, are set aside in favor of those who are shallow, selfish and manipulative? How can God possibly be behind this sort of thing? Why are innocent, beautiful, kind, tender people often victims, while the hard, aggressive types are so often the victors?

I heard some months ago of the death of Lem Tucker, in Mississippi. He was the chosen successor to John Perkins in the Voice of Calvary ministry, which is aimed at bringing about racial harmony and hope for rural, mostly black, Mississippi families. Yet, this magnificent young man, trained to take his place as a leader among a group of people who desperately need leadership, died inexplicably at an early age. Why? It doesn't make any sense at all that a group whose needs are so great lost a shining example of godly leadership, while other groups, who have more to begin with, carry on with little difficulty.

We are perplexed at times by what happens. We don't understand why we can't be heard. Despite this, however, we do not despair, because we know that God is at work

## **Being pursued**

We are "persecuted," says Paul. You may have seen the recent musical production of "Les Miserables," the story of a man who escapes from unjust imprisonment. Over the course of his life this man grows in grace and humility, yet he is hounded by a coldhearted policeman. The word translated "persecuted" here has the idea of being pursued relentlessly, and with malicious intent.

### **Suffering keeps us from exalting ourselves and undervaluing the treasure within**

Some of you have a black mark in your past, a dark period in your life that reappears time after time. Whenever something good is about to happen, the black mark in your personnel file is produced and it ruins the next stage in your life. You feel persecuted and pursued by a tragedy that will not let loose of you. Paul is saying that no matter how doggedly we are pursued, we are not abandoned by God. The pursuer is not greater than the protector.

"We are struck down, but not destroyed." This is the most severe form of attack. Your beloved is struck by cancer and dies. A terrible financial tragedy strikes and you find yourself out on the street, with no place to go. An unexpected blow lands and knocks you viciously to the ground. But even then, says Paul, we get up again. The resurrection power of God is at work to raise the believer to his feet again. We do not quit. We are not destroyed. All is not lost.

Christians are very ordinary clay pots. There is nothing intrinsically beautiful or powerful about us; there is nothing to commend us. We are fragile, temporary, functional, ordinary. But such pots were made to contain a great treasure—the life of God himself. He is beautiful beyond description, and powerful beyond measure. The surpassing greatness of the power is of God, and we find that our lives have a quality that is unexplained. We learn these lessons by suffering when we find ourselves in difficult circumstances; and we learn by the grace of God to accept them and not resist them. The surpassing greatness of the power of God does its work.

There are two final points I would like to highlight briefly. First, our experience of suffering may ultimately benefit other people, not ourselves. Twice (verses 12 and 15), Paul says that he and his friends were buffeted, hurt and rejected so that good would be done for the Corinthians. We do not always receive equal benefit for whatever sorrow we suffer, but other people in the body learn from our hurt, and grow strong.

And secondly, says Paul, it is in the resurrection that this process comes to an end. The one who raised Jesus from the dead will raise us from the dead, and we will all stand together in his presence. All the business of God working his will in us will not finally make sense until we add the resurrection from the dead. When we see that as the end of the process, then we have hope in the face of the difficulties in the interim.

Chapter 4, verse 16:

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. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Think of yourself as a clay pot that holds something very valuable, and your future experience is beyond describing. An eternal weight of glory is being prepared for us. Suffering in this life has a good result, because it keeps us from exalting ourselves and undervaluing the treasure within.

I will end by reading the closing paragraph of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, an imaginary world where the Christian gospel story is told all the way to the end—resurrection day. He recognizes that God is doing something greater in our lives than we give him credit for. What is seen is temporary; what is unseen is eternal.

For us, this is the end of all the stories. We can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them, it was only the beginning of the real story. All their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page. Now at last they were beginning chapter one of the great story, which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, and in which every chapter is better than the one before.

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Catalog No. 4221  
2 Corinthians 7:15  
Seventh Message  
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June 17, 1990

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