

Treasure in Jars of Clay

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Preacher: Jack Strain

[0 : 00] Good morning. May I add my welcome to Alan's, if you're watching at home. My name is Jack, and I'm a ministry trainee here at St Silas. Please keep that passage in 2 Corinthians open. We're not going to be looking at the whole chapter, even though we have the whole chapter read. We're going to be looking at verses 7 to verse 18. So please keep that open in front of you. We'll help you follow along. And then I'm going to pray for God's help as we start. Father God, as we look at your word together this morning, please help us to trust you, to know that you love us and care for us, and to trust that what you say is for our best. And as you reassure us of that, please help us to respond obediently to your word. In Jesus' name. Amen. As we start, I'd like us to think about a question, and the question is this, is why is speaking about Jesus so difficult? Why is speaking about Jesus so difficult? It doesn't really matter what the situation is, but any time you decide the right thing to do is to speak to someone about Jesus is tough. You often encounter difficulty and resistance from the people you are trying to speak to. You have to battle your own doubts and your own inadequacies, and it requires hard work and sacrifice. And this is true in all situations, whether it's being clear at work that you are a Christian, trying to speak to your colleagues about Jesus, maybe trying to invite them along to an online event, or asking them whether they might want to read the Bible with you. Whether it's trying to encourage other

Christians you know with God's word in the Bible, or leading a kid's own group, or creating a kid's own video, or leading in roots or growth groups, or committing to roots or growth group. Maybe trying to share the Bible with your family around the dinner table. Maybe trying to share the Bible with your family around the Bible.

Maybe trying to use heart. The difficulties just make one to go up and give up and to go and do something else, something easier. So it might be some comfort to us the words that Paul uses to describe how his ministry is for him in this passage. Look down at me at verse 7. This is the verse that we're going to exploring the implications of the rest of our time.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay. Now what does it mean to have treasure in jars of clay? The treasure is what we saw last week.

[3 : 20] The treasure is the glorious gospel of Jesus. It is in the message of Jesus as Lord that the glory of God is displayed as those words are spoken, the message of Jesus, of his death and his resurrection.

The treasure is the good news about Jesus and it is very, very powerful and very, very glorious. It is able to bring freedom and life and forgiveness and transformation.

The treasure is the gospel and jars of clay are people. Not just our physical bodies, but all of who we are, how we feel and how we think and how we act.

Treasure in jars of clay is a gospel carried by people. And what is it like? What does it mean to be a jar of clay? What is it like to be a jar of clay? Well, Paul tells us again in this passage.

Look down at verse 8. We are hard-pressed on every side. We are perplexed, persecuted and struck down.

[4 : 36] Feeling like there is nowhere to go. Dealing with confusion and uncertainty. Facing verbal and physical opposition. Immense pressure, both internally and externally, without and within.

And he gives us an inner word summary of what it is like to be a jar of clay. And look at verse 11. For we who are alive are always being given over to death.

Being a jar of clay is an experience of death. And death doesn't just mean, in this case, just being killed. You're physically dying.

But all forms of suffering up to that point. To be a jar of clay is to experience fragility and vulnerability. Jars of clay are easily breakable.

A jar of clay is the first century equivalent of a disposable coffee cup you might get from Pret or Costa or, you know, artisan roast. Or a takeaway box. They are fragile and breakable and unexceptionable.

[5 : 43] They are not designed to last. Jars of clay are not designed to last. They are used for their purpose and they get dropped and they get chipped and they get cracked. And that was Paul's experience of proclaiming Jesus.

And what is true of Paul is going to be true of us. People who step forward, who take that step forward into a work of proclaiming Jesus, inevitably experience this fragility. We get scared and we get hurt and we get confused. And what's more, there's never a time where it won't be like this.

Look again at verse 10. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus. Verse 11. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake.

This is the normal experience of people who speak about the good news of Jesus in whatever context. And you see, the Corinthians don't like this.

[6 : 55] I think they really hate it and we're really getting to the heart of Paul's relationship with them here. As they see Paul and they see his suffering and they see his weakness, they're asking this, Paul, if your gospel is so glorious, if the good news of Jesus is so amazing, if it's as powerful as you say it is, if it's this treasure, then why are you so weak?

Why do you suffer so much? Why aren't you more impressive? If you were really doing God's work, then people wouldn't hate you so much.

Or you might look like you were more in control of your travel plans. you wouldn't look so weak. You might be a bit richer, a bit more comfortable.

You might look a bit more impressive. But Paul is completely unashamed of being this way. In fact, he thinks it's a good thing.

It is a good thing that he is this way. And in this passage, we're going to see why he thinks that. So verse 7 again. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

[8 : 15] The purpose of the carriers of God's glorious gospel being weak and fragile and breakable and to experience death day by day is to show that it is God's power at work and not ours.

And here's something to think about. What is the worst case scenario that you can imagine in speaking about Jesus? Like, the very worst thing that could happen to you. Maybe you could think, I could lose my job for speaking about Jesus at work.

If I'm really clear that I believe that Jesus is Lord, I could lose my job. Maybe it would be your friends just might not want to be quite so friendly with you anymore. They might grow a distance or a coldness in the relationship because you tried to speak to them about Jesus.

And perhaps you might become the family weirdo. Or it could be even more extreme. I was reading an article yesterday, a kind of review of the countries in which it is toughest to be a Christian in the world.

One of those countries was Afghanistan. And it said, in Afghanistan, Christians who become Christians from a Muslim background can be sectioned. They can be admitted to a psychiatric hospital because leaving Islam is a sign of insanity.

[9 : 26] I want to say those things are not the worst case scenario. The worst case scenario is it might look like the power in your ministry and in your life came from you.

That it would look like you were in control, that this glorious, life-giving ministry was somehow your idea and that you were the one who could really help people and not the Lord Jesus.

To use Paul's language, to see the clay pot as the great thing, to see the takeaway coffee cup as the really amazing thing and not the treasure of the gospel. Because that would make it all about you and not about God.

The ministry of the gospel that we've been thinking about over the past few weeks is glorious precisely because it fully reveals God's glory, the glory of the creator of the universe and not ours. So God deliberately keeps people who speak about him weak and fragile so that he can show his power.

[10 : 31] So Paul, verse 8, is hard-pressed but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed.

God in his power keeps those who speak for him going. It's not over. Paul's experience of ministry is like being a boxer who's losing a fight and that's where the language of struck down comes from. It's sporting or military. I've never really been one for watching boxing. It's quite, it's such a brutal sport but I've seen some and it's just something kind of so, I was like, sickening when you see someone and you can see that they are struggling and they're outmatched.

They've been knocked down to the canvas time after time. They are bloodied and beaten. Their eyes are swollen. They can barely see out. They can't really stand. They wobble every time they get back to their feet but nevertheless they continue to fight.

I'm sitting there thinking, how, given all that you've taken, how are you still standing? How are you still going? And that is what it's like in Paul's ministry. It looks like the fight should have been stopped a long time ago and the umpire should have stepped in but he hasn't been destroyed and the fight is not over.

[11 : 57] The fact that he is not crushed, that he hasn't completely given up, the fact he's not abandoned, that he hasn't been destroyed, shows the life-giving power of God. He keeps him going. So God deliberately keeps people who speak about Jesus weak, experiencing death, to display his life-giving power.

But that's not the only thing we see here in these verses about why it's a good thing but it is this way. We're going to look at verses 10 and 12 again. We always carry around in our body the death 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 also be revealed in our mortal bodies. So then, death is at work in us but life is at work in you.

Verse 12, I think, just kind of catches you by surprise a bit. There's a twist. You might think he's going to say, so death is at work in us but life is at work in us. There's a conclusion to his arguments in those verses.

But no, it's not that. Death is at work in us but life is at work in you. Life is at work in you. Why does Paul keep on speaking?

[13 : 22] You can read later on in 2 Corinthians, we're looking at it later as a church family, in chapter 11 he describes his experience. I just want to read it out because I think it's a powerful description of Paul's experience of his ministry.

That's from chapter 11 verses 23 to 29. I've worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, been exposed to death again and again.

Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones. Three times I was shipwrecked.

I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep. I have known hunger and thirst and have gone without food. I have been cold and naked.

[14 : 33] And besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches who is weak and I do not feel weak, who is led into sin and I do not inwardly burn.

Why should Paul speak if it's just going to lead him to so much trouble? Why should we keep on speaking if it keeps on meaning trouble for us? We see in these verses, in verse 12, Paul speaks despite suffering because it means life for other people.

Death for us means life for others. That's why it's a good thing. Look down with me again at verse 13 and 14, I haven't looked at it yet, verse 13 and 14.

It is written, I believe, therefore I have spoken. Since we have 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 to himself.

So Paul believes, therefore he speaks and what does he believe? Well it's there in verse 14, 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.

[15 : 53] Paul believes in the resurrection. Paul believes in dead people coming back to life with new physical bodies. He believes that one wonderful, glorious day in the future, the end of history when Jesus returns, God will raise him from the dead, he will raise the Corinthians from the dead and what's more he will raise everyone who believed in the Lord Jesus from the dead.

So he speaks to people so that they might share in that amazing day for themselves, that they might hear about Jesus, that they might believe in him for themselves and they will get the gift of eternal life, a resurrection body when Jesus returns.

Verse 15, he does this for your benefit so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

benefit to more and more people. I think this is something we're actually used to at the moment.

The idea of putting up with something difficult for the benefit of other people is our current experience as a society.

We are putting up with restrictions for COVID, we are limiting our social lives, we are studying on Zoom, we can't really go and play sports and the reason we're doing that is so that people don't die and that's my pretty basic understanding of why we're going through what we're going through at the moment.

[17 : 26] And we'll willingly do it, I think even though we don't like it, well, most of us don't like it, we suffer inconvenience because we know that our actions are for someone else's good in the future, i.e.

if we don't go around other people's houses, then that will stop the spread of the virus and stop people from dying and that will be better for them. But in this case it's not the obedience to government restrictions that is going to save lives, it is our speech, despite suffering, for the eternal benefit of others so that they might have eternal life which will bring praise and glory to God.

It is the ultimate life-saving mission. And then there's more, there's yet another reason that this ministry that seems like death to those who do it is a glorious and wonderful thing.

Verses 16 and 17. 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.

Do you see what Paul is saying about his current suffering and his current death? It's not that it's purposeless, his suffering for the gospel. And his troubles are not just doing something for others, it's doing something for him.

[19 : 08] they are preparing for him, achieving for him an eternal glory that is far, far greater than anything you could have now.

Now I think that's an astonishing truth here. His current suffering and weakness for the sake of the gospel of Jesus is producing an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison.

And that is why he does not give up. That is why he does not lose heart. That is why he does not walk away from the difficulty. He is renewed instead day by day.

It means to see that any suffering for the gospel now, any experience of death, is connected to an overwhelming, staggering weight of glory in the future.

It's not that Paul earns it by suffering now, and that's not how it works, but it's that God graciously uses the suffering of his people now to work for our eternal good and glory in eternity.

[20 : 16] His outer self is wasting away, and that means he is decaying, like we all are. We are mortal bodies in decline, gradually.

And Paul's experience in gospel ministry is that has only been accelerated. But that is not the end for Paul. And as we experience that in sacrificial service of Jesus, it is not the end for us.

His inner self is being renewed day by day as he sees the future that is to come. If this world and this life was all there was, I think you would be absolutely right just to run out the door any time someone so much has mentioned any sort of suffering for Jesus.

Why would you do it? Why would you go through with it? This life, if this life is all there is, it is way too precious to waste on suffering for the gospel, on inconvenience for the gospel of Jesus.

I actually can't think you really want to be a Christian at all if this life was all there was. In fact, to make such a thing sustainable, you just had to change what being a Christian was all about.

[21 : 28] You just had to focus exclusively on the benefits of being a Christian here and now, and that's not Christianity at all. But the radical call of Jesus is that we can die now, die for his sake and for the sake of the gospel and be recreated anew with unimaginable glory.

It's almost like Paul was putting it all on a set of scales. Modern scales obviously don't really do this because you just put it on a little plate and press a button and it flashes. What you can't do is you can't compare old-fashioned scales, the weight on each side.

And Paul puts his life of suffering for Jesus on the scales. And you think, I think definitely that sounds pretty heavy. Flogged, beaten, shipwrecked, put in prison, hunger, confusion.

But look at how he describes it. A light and momentary trouble. It's not that he's saying it's not painful, that he can just somehow ignore the pain.

You know, like someone is able to walk on hot coals without feeling the heat. He's saying that it's light because what is on the other side of the scales, it's beyond comparison, it far outweighs it.

[22 : 42] However bad you think now is, the future with Jesus is far, far greater. What's on the other side is his resurrection body and an eternity with the Lord.

And he sees that his suffering now is achieving that incredible future. So what does God have to say to us at St Silas as we sit at home this morning?

God is inviting us to change our perspective on suffering for speaking the gospel of Jesus. Because I think when we see our weakness and our apparent inability and the potential suffering, we only see reasons not to speak, not to step forward.

But when we think that, we forget about the power of God. He wants to use weak, suffering people for his glory and for our good. Our suffering, our experience of difficulty and pain is a reason to step forward to do it.

Because to step forward for Jesus when suffering, when weak, when fragile, that is truly powerful. It will put the power and glory of God on display to the world and it will renew you.

[24 : 08] And a question I'd encourage you to talk about in your Zoom chats afterwards is what would it look like for you to do that? Specifically for you, what are the actual situations that you face in your life where you could step forward and embrace this weakness and put your trust in the power of God and experience this day by day renewal?

What are the actual places that you could do that? For some of us, we might need to think about where we could speak, where we haven't been speaking before. And perhaps there are colleagues or friends who we haven't spoken to we've never tried, perhaps because of the fear of what might happen to us if we do.

Some of us might be counting the cost from where we've done that before. And you might be thinking, I'm not sure if I want to do that again. I'm not sure I want to continue speaking about Jesus, at least not in this way, not in the way that creates so much difficulty.

So maybe it's a chance for us to take stock, to believe what God says about his power, and the good it will do us and the good it will do others for us to speak about him, and knowing that he will renew us as we do so.

Let's pray. Father God, you have the power and the glory belongs to you.

[25 : 49] We ask that you would help us to trust and rely on this, and to know that you use our light and momentary trouble to prepare for us an eternal weight of glory.

Please help us to fix our eyes on that amazing unseen future that you have for us. In Jesus' name, Amen.