

## “Treasure in Clay Jars”

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*<sup>5</sup>For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup>For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup>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.*

*<sup>8</sup>We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup>always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. <sup>11</sup>For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup>So death is at work in us, but life in you. (2 Corinthians 4:5-12)*

I want to start by saying that I consider these verses from Paul's letters to the church in Corinth to be among the greatest treasures in scripture. These comforting, reassuring, encouraging, and motivating words remind me of something that a wise and experienced coach might say at halftime to a team getting trounced by its cross-town rival, like a pep rally for the discouraged and downtrodden.

But like many treasures, we have to dig a little to find it, because this gem is not only buried in dirt, it says that we are dirt. God has granted and given to us, out of grace and boundless love, a precious gift, Paul says, but there is an irony in it, because "*we have this treasure in clay jars.*" And what is clay, but wet dirt?

This should not shock or surprise us, because the Old Testament compares the people of God to clay a number of times. In the book of Genesis, God creates humankind by scooping up a handful of dust from the ground and forming it into a body, then breathing the breath of life into our nostrils.<sup>1</sup> Know that "you are dust," God says, "and to dust you shall return."<sup>2</sup> In Jeremiah's vision of the potter's shed, humanity is represented by the clay pot in God's hands. Even though we are a spoiled creation on the pottery wheel, God is still busy working to reclaim us and reshape us into something beautiful and useful.<sup>3</sup>

Given that we are, in the eyes of scripture, like jars of clay, what does that say about us? One thing it suggests is that we are commonplace items. If in your travels you have ever toured a royal palace or castle, chances are that one of the rooms you toured displayed elegant collections of china, glassware, and ornamental ceramics used for grand state dinners. Our own White House has the China Room, where stately patterns adorn the dishes used by past Presidents and their families. Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, it is said, liked to use the Lincoln "solferino" purple china for special occasions. When entertaining large crowds, the Clintons used the Reagan red and gold federalist pattern, but they preferred the colorful and nature-themed Rutherford B. Hayes china for more intimate

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:7.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:19.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 18:1-6.



holiday dinners.<sup>4</sup> As you might imagine, most of the White House china collection spends nearly all of its time in storage, with only small batches coming out on special occasions.

Clay pottery, by contrast, is designed for more ordinary use. Throughout history, clay has been used to make commonplace, frequently-used items because it is abundant, readily accessible, and relatively inexpensive. If a piece of everyday china gets broken, it is unfortunate, but it is not a national tragedy. And some pieces can get scratched or chipped and still be very useful. That is why pieces of clay pottery are the most frequently discovered items in archaeological digs. Every civilization, in every age, has found uses for implements made with common clay. They are common, but valued... breakable, yet strong... humble, but remarkably useful day in and day out. This is why, in Paul's mind, comparing human beings to clay pots was not as much of a put-down as we might think.

It was also the way Paul viewed himself as a preacher and a leader in the church. It is clear from his writing that, as he worked in and around the Corinthian church, some of his biggest obstacles were other preachers and leaders who were starting to turn the heads of people in Paul's church. By and large, these other preachers were taller, more handsome, more articulate, and more charismatic than Paul. By contrast, Paul seemed smaller, goofier, and generally less impressive. Paul actually came up with a term for these other preachers: *hyperlian a-post-olon*, which meant "the most eminent apostles," or the "super-apostles." He meant it pejoratively, because Paul was not at all impressed by these guys.

This is why I am in favor of a brand-new translation, which is not only consistent with the original Greek, but also speaks to today's young people. That new translation is "extra-apostles." These guys, as Paul saw it, were "so extra." They were all sizzle and no steak, glitz and glamour without any real substance or staying power. Still, the comparisons that people would make, the things that people would say, probably left Paul feeling a little inadequate, a little self-conscious... kind of like a clay jar compared to the Lincoln solferino china. But the more Paul pondered this predicament, he began to see in it a real blessing. It is good, Paul decided, to be a clay jar. "I might not look like much on the outside," Paul began to say, "but I am useful, I am durable, and I will show up for you day in and day out."

Traditional Jewish teaching tells a story about the daughter of a Roman emperor who once personally insulted the rabbinical teacher Yehoshua ben Chananya. "Isn't it terrible," she said, "that such glorious wisdom and wonderful teaching would come from such an ugly vessel." I know right? She was so extra.

Anyway, the rabbi was not about to let this over-privileged kid get the best of him. His quick wit told him just what to say. "Does your father keep his wine in simple clay vessels?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Why wouldn't he? In what kind of container should he keep it?"

"Well," the rabbi replied. "I would think that people as important as you would put your wine in vessels of gold or silver."

The emperor's daughter ran and told this to her father, who immediately transferred the royal wine into ornate vessels of gold and silver. In a short time, all of the wine turned sour. When the emperor learned that all of the wine was lost, he angrily summoned his daughter. "Who told you to do this?"

When she told him, the emperor called for Rabbi Yehoshua. "Why did you give my daughter the idea to move our wine into gold and silver casks?"

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China\\_Room](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China_Room)

The rabbi responded, “I merely repeated back to her what she had said to me – that, in her opinion, precious contents should be stored in precious containers.”

The emperor looked confused, so the teacher continued. “In my experience, the opposite is true. Fine material is best preserved in humble vessels.”

“But isn’t it true,” the emperor argued, “that there are handsome people who are also learned?”

“Ah, yes,” the rabbi replied. “But if they had been ugly, they would have been even more learned.”<sup>5</sup>

There is truth in that, and Paul saw himself and his ministry in that very way. He understood that suffering can build character. And, truth be told, Paul was not the prettiest, the coolest, or even the most eloquent preacher and teacher. Still, God had entrusted him with a rare and precious treasure. He might have been humble in appearance, he may not have looked like much, but that only allowed the treasure that he carried to shine more brightly. Paul knew that what made him remarkable was not who he was, it was the heavenly treasure inside of him: the gift of knowing Christ, the light of Christ, the love of Christ that lived in him. His treasure was the amazing realization that the God who created the heavens and the earth loves us, cherishes us, and has wonderful plans for us. That is the real miracle, Paul said to the Corinthians, that the very same God who at the beginning of time uttered the divine words, “*Let there be light*,” actually knows who we are. The eternal Creator of the universe seeks us out, draws us near, and stands ready to impart to us the highest and best wisdom there is: “*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.*”

It is the same miraculous gift that made the psalmist marvel as he gazed up at the night sky. “*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established,*” the poet wrote, it makes me wonder, “*what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*” And yet, by some miracle, You, O God, have made us just “*a little lower than God, and crowned [us] with glory and honor.*”<sup>6</sup> That is the gift, that is the treasure that makes us miracles, too. That we could be vessels of God’s light, God’s knowledge, God’s love... that God, in Christ, really is “God with us.” That is the treasure that we are privileged to bear.

There is, however, a danger lurking in this blessing. If we are not careful with this wealth, we can, as my grandparents used to say, get “a little too big for our britches.” We might begin to feel a little too safe, a little too proud, a little too satisfied with ourselves. This is why it is good, Paul continued, to remember that we hold “*this treasure in clay jars, so that [it remains clear to us and the world] that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*”

If we can hold fast to both truths – a humble awareness that we are made of dust, coupled with a recognition that we carry the holy breath of God within us – that is an incredibly powerful combination. If pieces of ancient pottery can be discovered intact having survived for thousands of years, imagine how durable and indestructible an alloy of heaven and earth might be.

And that carries us right to the pep rally. If you are feeling low... if life seems to be beating you up and spitting you out... if you are feeling like you are just not measuring up to the standards the world wants to impose upon you... of if, lately, you have just felt like

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<sup>5</sup> <https://qchabad.org/you-are-so-ugly/>

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 8:3-5.

dirt... remember that God's grace, God's love, and God's power has been poured into you. We may be simple clay, but we are also fortified with the strength, the beauty, and the glory of heaven. And as long as we have that, there is nothing we cannot withstand, nothing we cannot survive, nothing we cannot conquer. As Paul says in his final flourish, "*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.*"

The mystic Thomas Merton once wrote that "At the center of our being is a point... which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God. ... This little point... is the pure glory of God in us... It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely."<sup>7</sup>

We may be jars of clay, humble vessels made of dirt, but we should never forget that we hold a priceless treasure, and that makes all the difference.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/769175-at-the-center-of-our-being-is-a-point-of>