

In this fourth session we shall endeavor to take hold of the fact that the man of faith is an insufficient vessel containing sufficient treasure. We shall look at an intriguing set of terms that Paul develops through 2 Corinthians 4. First though, let us return once more to the passage we have deemed as thematic for this course:

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

(2 Corinthians 3:5-6)

The fact of the matter is this: man is not sufficient to supply the resources needed for the life he is called to live. But the believer need not be driven to despair because his sufficiency is from God. The life God calls us to live is one for which He is entirely willing to supply the resources necessary to its fulfillment. This is a wonderful arrangement for the believer—this is the new covenant, God's new arrangement for living.

These resources of God are available to servants of the new covenant. The new covenant of grace stands in stark contrast with the old covenant of law. The believer is granted and sustained life, not by the letter, but by the Spirit—that is, life comes not by rules to keep, but by God's Spirit as He supplies the believer's needs and grants him life.

### **Earthen Vessels with Heavenly Treasure**

The title of this session comes from 2 Corinthians 4, which speaks of earthen vessels filled with heavenly treasure. God has set a pattern into the Christian life. He has crafted men as earthen

vessels. Men are weak and ordinary, as if made of clay. Earthen, frail, vulnerable, and inadequate, believers are meant for a purpose but are entirely insufficient for its demands. The Scripture says that God knows our frame that we are but dust—not gold dust, but the common, ordinary kind.

And yet:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence  
of the power may be of God and not of us. (2 Corinthians 4:7)

The wonder of being a vessel is that vessels are designed to contain something. And that is where the believer's meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in life rests—in the treasure he is meant to contain. And yet still, the believer is but an earthen vessels. Though a container, we might refer to the believer as a simple, clay flower pot. Now a clay pot is no big thing, but containing the right flower, its worth is magnified—magnified for how it reflects the beauty of the flower. This is a good picture of what the Christian life is supposed to be. The believer has great treasure kept within earthen vessels of his body and soul, in fact, within his very life. Paul has already told us of this great treasure:

For we are to God the fragrance of Christ. (2 Corinthians 2:15)

That very word, fragrance, fits the imagery we have already presented of a flower in a container. “We are a fragrance of Christ.” This fragrance comes not from the clay pot, but from that which resides in the pot. If one is to be the fragrance of Christ, that sweet-smelling aroma can only originate from Christ Himself. A clay pot only has an ordinary earthen fragrance and can never smell as a fresh flower. The fragrance comes from Christ Himself, because the life of Jesus is

manifested in the believer's body (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:10). The life of Christ is the treasure housed within the believer's earthen vessel. It is the life of Christ that is manifested from within the believer's mortal flesh (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:11).

The earthen vessel: mortal flesh. The treasure: the life of Jesus. Recall Colossians 1:27, "Christ in us, our hope of glory." That is Paul's point here. The believer hosts incredible treasure in an ignoble, earthen vessel. God has ordained this to be that "the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." If any excellent power is seen in and through the believer's life, it is to be seen clearly as something foreign to his nature—it must be clear that God is the power of excellency residing in the believer.

Of course, this is not the manner in which humanity regularly thinks. Man generally focuses upon the earthen vessel. He shines it, paints it, polishes it, shapes it, postures it, and does whatever he can to keep it from perishing. But the outer man is perishing daily. There is no way to stop the process brought on by the Curse. The believer is encouraged to recognize these vessels are only meant for a temporary season. As long as the inner man is being renewed day by day, the believer walks the right path and God is having His way in the man.

So then, the believer holds within himself (as an earthen vessel) an exceedingly valuable treasure. And he is given this treasure that the transcendent, extraordinary excellency of the power would be recognized of God and not of us. The dynamic, animating force that is to develop, drive, and produce a Christian life is to come from the contents of the vessel, not the vessel itself. This power is to come from the treasure rather from the human in whom the treasure dwells—from the flower rather than from the clay flowerpot. This is a picture of insufficient vessels, containing sufficient treasure.

**The Process that Magnifies the Treasure:**

Now further, Paul describes a process described that magnifies the treasure.

We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)

This speaks of earthen vessels—those same vessels hosting divine treasure. It speaks of the believer in Christ. It speaks of the Christian life from a significant perspective.

The believer, who is indwelt by the treasure of the life of Christ, is hard pressed on every side. He faces major pressures from every direction. He is pressed hard from on every side. And though clay pots are not built to take pressure (it does not take much pressure to crush a clay flower pot), because of the strength of the treasure within, the believer is not crushed. That the excellence of the power may be seen of God, the believer is able to stand strong in the midst of trials, difficulties, and circumstances beyond his imagining. The believer must learn to be sustained by the treasure of the life of Christ that dwells within the believer's earthen vessel.

Further developing our understanding of the process by which the treasure is magnified, we find that the believer is perplexed but not in despair. The perplexities in life are great, and yet, are ultimately unable to overwhelm the believer. Life is fraught with a constant flow of decisions—many of them tough—and answers often seem fewer in supply than the questions. Men face the perplexing issues of life daily. Priorities must be carved out and met. But though the believer is

driven near to despair, he does not. He does not end in hopelessness for he is filled with a great and steadfast treasure: Christ's life and Spirit.

Still more, the believer is persecuted but not forsaken. Those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ are ripe for persecution. Those earthen vessels in which the life of Christ comes to dwell are destined to end up as vessels hated by the world. The more a believer rejoices in Christ and walks in His way, the more he stands as a mark of conviction against the unbeliever. The believer becomes—by simple virtue of his changed life—an irritation to those who remain in the world. As salt in their wound and light in their darkness, so the believer becomes the stark contrast between fragrant life and odious death.

When once a man comes to believe, he will find himself accused, misunderstood, opposed, and maliciously used by the people of the world. Once a man is saved, even his relationship with his family may sour (whereas before, they could not wait to see him coming, now they might not wait to see him going). Even Christ declares this to be the way of the Christian: "A servant is not greater than his master—if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (cf. John 15:18ff). Because of the treasure held within these earthen vessels, there is a predictable persecution that will take place. But here is the amazing thing: though the believer may be persecuted to the uttermost, he need not despair. Though persecuted, the believer is never forsaken. If the whole world stands against him, the believer can stand proud in the strength of the Gospel, declaring, "The one who lives in me, who is the treasure in my life and the flower that blooms in my clay vessel, is with me. He stands for me and shall never be against me."

Still more, we find that as earthen vessels, believers shall be struck down but not destroyed.

These are not the everyday pressures of life that Paul pictures here. These are the catastrophes of

life—those events that are so strong in their force that they threaten to destroy the heart and mind of those caught in their wake. And yet, God is still faithful. The believer is struck down yet not destroyed. Life hits hard, and yet, the child of God does not fail to get up and go on. This is not because of anything so grand as the popular sentiment “I am a survivor.” That grants too much strength to the vessel. Clay pots do not survive much. Maybe a light breeze. Maybe a bumblebee or two landing on it. Clay pots cannot survive even small things like a hammer, a short fall off a table, or an errant baseball. No, the believer continues to persevere not because he is a born survivor but because he contains the excellent power of God available in Christ Jesus. By His grace, His work, His mercy, and His presence, the believer gets up once more to face the world and his trials. The believer carries on because God will not forsake the believer.

We hold this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God, not of ourselves. This is a whole new way to live. The world is taught to make a simple pot look like an ancient Chinese vase from the Ming Dynasty. The world wants the vessel to be the priceless treasure. After 150 coats of hand-painted shellac, they no longer see a clay pot; all that remains is a gorgeous decorative vase. But Scripture will not kid the believer on this matter—he is an earthen vessel and no better. The glory of life, the meaning of life, the joy in life, the purpose of life, and the fulfillment in life all revolve not around the clay vessel, but around the treasure God places in each vessel! It is humbling to be an earthen vessel, to be sure. But it is far more exhilarating to have the treasure of Christ within.

This passage describes the harsher circumstances of life as if they approach as a tank. And there stands the believer: a clay flowerpot. This is not a fair match, but life does come at the believer like a tank, relentlessly rolling toward the child of God. It is big, it is heavy, and there is nothing

the believer can do to stop it. No matter his preparation, no matter how he tries vainly to roll out of the way, it can only amount to, *at which angle will he be crushed?*

But Paul describes life here in this way, coming upon the believer as a tank. And the only reason, when the dust clears, that the believer still stands is the treasure in the flowerpot. The flower, blooming, fragrant, and growing, is stronger than even the most crushing of life's struggles. Those pots that are without the bloom of Christ's life will be shattered and destroyed, left to their despair. The only ones that can survive are those who play host to the treasure of God within their very souls.

#### **An Attitude Held by the Believer:**

Paul further describes an attitude that persists in these earthen vessels that have been made invulnerable by the treasure they keep.

Always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus,  
that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. (2  
Corinthians 4:10)

The believer carries with himself always, in the human vessel of his life, the dying of the Lord Jesus. That reality exists in him. He embraces it. He confesses it. We do not deny it for it is joy to him. The child of God is always aware that because he, the believer, deserved death and everlasting darkness, Jesus Christ died upon the cross. That too he carries in himself as an earthen vessel, the dying of Jesus.

The world may speak colloquially about what a person deserves, saying “He deserves a wife like Cleopatra and Betty Crocker rolled up into one!” or “She deserves a husband who looks like Arnold Swartzenegger, but has the heart and mind of William Shakespeare.” Man does not deserve that.

Rather, as earthen vessels, man deserves nothing better than the grave. And as an earthen vessel, the believer carries always about with himself the dying of Christ Jesus. Christ died for the believer's desserts. And in order that he never forget that Christ paid the ultimate penalty for what the believer deserved, the believer carries that death around always. Christ did not die because He deserved death. He did so as a gift to His bride, the church. And so, all believers carry that about all through their lives. And the child of God cherishes that fact. He embraces that gift. For in carrying Christ's death, the Christian carries too His life.

Jesus said in Luke 9:24 that those who would try to save their life would lose it. And further, those who would lose their life for Jesus' sake would find it. Those who are focused upon the glory of their earthen vessel—trying to make their clay flowerpot really pleasing to the eye and make a life out of it—they will lose everything to time and eternity. Those who renounce what the flowerpot can offer by embracing the dying of Jesus will find a full and glorious life, now and forever—a life in Christ.

Therefore, the believer always carries about the dying of Christ that the life of Christ might be manifested in the believer's body—that Christ might be seen right through the earthen vessel He inhabits. As Jesus said, “If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Me.” So the child of God says, “No!” to this clay pot. He says, “The cross for this clay pot!” He follows Christ Jesus for life—and that eternal. Christ, the treasure who lives in

His people, is the pursuit of His people. Recall Galatians 2:20. "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me." That is the believer's attitude—one of humility towards oneself and one of hope toward Christ.

### **An Action Fulfilled by God**

As earthen vessels, believers not only carry about with them a special attitude related to the cross, the dying of Jesus, but as well are acted upon by God Himself.

For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake,  
that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.  
(2 Corinthians 4:11)

This speaks of those who live—those earthen vessels who have come alive in Christ. Everyone on earth is an earthen vessel. Every child of Adam is an earthen vessel, a clay container. The difference between the world and Christians has never been that they are earthen vessels and believers are heavenly vases. If all people are earthen vessels, the difference then is what is held within the vessels. Believers are filled with treasure, while the unbeliever is not. The unbeliever is filled with his own death, whereas the believer is filled with the dying of Christ, which is life. The unregenerate man is a clay pot filled with no good thing. The child of God is the same kind of pot, but filled with every good thing. The believer is always learning to be filled with the blossoming life of Jesus Christ.

Believers are those who have come alive. Where once like the world, dead in sin in Adam, the believer, through faith in Jesus, has come alive. And now, being alive, he is always delivered unto

death. This is sobering. Those alive in Christ are always delivered to death, handed over to mortification.

This is not negativism. This is just one part of reality. Praise God for speaking the truth to His children. And let us not think this a morbid reality for it is on account of Christ that the believer is killed all the day long—evidence of his eternal life! So the believer rejoices in the Lord always. He is the cause of joy. He is the source of joy. He is the one who sustains joy.

There is, in the path of believers, a consistent series of impossibilities that stand in their opposition. This does not imply any lack of love on the part of God toward His children, but merely that He uses means to bless the believer that His children might not understand. He ordains this constant delivery unto death to demonstrate His love for His people. This matures the believer, teaching him that life is a battle zone. The terminology of warfare fills the New Testament. God uses daily circumstance to prepare the believer for it, to use the believer in it, and to use it in the believer.

And further note, believers are always delivered to death *for* Jesus' sake, that the life of Christ Jesus also might be manifested in the mortal flesh of His people. Ought not Christ have the right to be seen in and through those for whom He died? The believer's life is not his own. He has been bought with a price. Therefore, Christ deserves the glory and the honor of being visibly witnessed in the lives of believers. And it is God who works upon the believer's life that such might occur.

The Lord knows how to get the hearts of His children locked upon Him. Believers increasingly learn that as earnestly as they call upon Him in moments of agony, they should likewise learn to call upon Him in times of ecstasy too. The believer's focus upon glorifying and taking joy in the

Lord should be unchanging no matter the circumstance. Colossians 2:17 reinforces this saying, "Whatever you do, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus."

The Lord Jesus Christ is seen most often and most clearly in the believer as he is delivered over to death, put in impossible situations, and perseveres despite outward appearances to the contrary. The believer calls upon God in these situations and He comes through. And the life of Jesus is manifested in Christian's mortal flesh, in his human, fading humanity. Christ Jesus is seen through His people.

### **The Temporal Impact on Others**

As the attitude held by believers about the dying of Christ Jesus lets Him be seen in and through the lives of believer, so too does God's active work upon the lives of believers allow Christ to be seen clearly through those lives. It is of no wonder then that all of this has a temporal impact on others.

So then death is working in us, but life in you. (2 Corinthians  
4:12)

Paul's statement is intriguing. This whole passage is intriguing. Death is working in the believer going through the tough situations, but life is working in the believers who hear about it. As Paul reflects upon his own walk and the difficulties underwent by his earthen vessel, he notes that it was death working in him; but through the perspective of those believers in Corinth, life was working abundantly.

Though the personal experience of the believer is one of death and hardship, those surrounding him are given eyes to see the bigger picture. They recognize that just as God worked in the past, so shall He work again that He might be glorified through the perseverance of His child. So death works in the life of one believer, but through him life in the other. Others see God at work and are revived. They are stirred. Life works in them.

### **The Eternal Impact on the Believer**

Again, this is not morbid. This shaping of the one and touching of the other is designed for the glorious purposes of God. And still, there is more to this paradigm than its mere temporal impact; it can potentially have an eternal impact on the believer.

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for  
us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. (2  
Corinthians 4:17)

Note the contrast here: light afflictions for the moment and an eternal weight of glory. This momentary, light affliction is contrasted powerfully with the everlasting treasure of glory in store for the believer. The afflictions are momentary while the glory stands eternal. The afflictions, despite being crushing, are counted as light by comparison to the glory and pleasure to come. Despite the continual trials and difficulties undergone by himself and other believers, being persecuted, beaten, scourged, and stoned, Paul (by God's Spirit) is able to refer to such difficulties as "momentary, light afflictions."

The natural reaction of the believer would be to think that afflictions are working against him. Of his own vision and perspective, man would never imagine that the agonies of life are working for

his benefit. Yet by God's grace the believer can be enabled to view life and its difficulties through God's perspective.

The word, "weight," has to do with fullness or capacity. It fits the picture of a vessel quite well for it is God's intention that these momentary light afflictions would enlarge the believer's capacity as a vessel. Peter speaks of the believer's abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom in 2 Peter 1. Paul, too, speaks of heavenly reward in 1 Corinthians 3. Everyone in heaven is going to be so glad they are there and rejoicing and blessed, but not everyone will have the same experience there. Jesus said, "He who is faithful in a little will be made ruler of much." The believer's capacity to serve the glory of God will be filled to completion in the heavenly kingdom. And it is the weathering of trials in faithful perseverance that enlarges that capacity, making one believer a larger vessel than perhaps another.

What then is the difference from life to life, from vessel to vessel, and from experience to experience in heaven? The difference revolves around the momentary light afflictions. And unfortunately, this is easily confused and many make a great mistake in this regard. Many come to feel that to whatever degree they experience difficulties in life at the present, it will automatically be conversely glorious in heaven. The truth is that it is not simply the trials that enlarge the believer's vessel for this eternal fullness or capacity of glory. The heart of the matter, and the thing that truly works to enlarge the believer's capacity for the glorious, is the heart of the believer. Paul tells us that the momentary, light affliction produces an eternal weight of glory, "while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

Too many Christians, too much of the time waste their afflictions and their difficulties. By focusing on the visible and the temporal, they forfeit the fruit these trials can cultivate in the perseverant life. It is not looking to the circumstances themselves but to God's awesome hand that enlarges one's spiritual capacity. These afflictions produce an eternal weight of glory when the believer does not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen—at eternal things. Those who go through their trials not focusing on the vessel, but focusing on the treasure—the Lord Jesus, His kingdom, His plans, His sovereignty, His faithfulness, His adequacy, His sufficiency—those lives are enlarged. Their momentary light afflictions are producing for them an everlasting capacity to enter into the fullness of the glory of God.

### **Conclusion**

This is an astounding view of the Christian life. We would never, ever imagine this if God had not revealed it to us in His word. Being insufficient vessels containing sufficient treasure fits right into God's sufficiency for godly living. The fact that we, as believers, are simply earthen vessels, clay flowerpots, is humbling. But God gives grace to the humble. Seeing the inadequacy of our vessel, our human life, throws us upon the grace, the goodness, and the sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ. Finding in the treasure, this blooming, fragrant life of Christ is what the believer's life is all about. That others might see Him in us. That He might be glorified. That they might be touched. And along the way, we who believe might be enlarged for fullness of life with Him ever more.