

Treasure in Clay Jars

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Preacher: Paul Dudley

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 18th of July 2004. The preacher is Paul Dudley.

His sermon is entitled Treasure in Clay Jars and is based on 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 1 to 15. Amen. Father, we do indeed thank you that you are a God who reigns now and it is because of this that we meet here and we pray, Father, that you will be opening our minds and our hearts to your word, that we may indeed give you honour and glory in all that we do.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. There is nothing more crushing than that moment when you lose heart.

Where you have goals and desires, where you can see the finish line. It's just there over the hill but you see it slip through your fingers.

[1 : 09] That moment when you're left with nothing. There's nothing to keep you going. There's no way forward. There's no way back. The odds are stacked against you and all your options are closed.

That moment when you lose heart and you know that you're not going to reach that goal or that desire or that place.

It's a time where you're driven to despair. A time where you're crushed and you feel like there's no way out. It's time, it's this time that you hear the fat lady sing.

I was on a triathlon down here. I trained for about a year, swimming, running and riding.

Doing a lot of training, day in and day out. It was a long triathlon. I wasn't a particularly great athlete but I trained hard for this triathlon.

[2 : 10] I came down here, down to Melbourne from Sydney to do it. So, it's a long way to do this triathlon. And the night before the triathlon I'd eaten my carbo loading.

You know, plenty of pasta. In fact, I had two big bowls of pasta. I was going to make sure I was going to finish this triathlon. But the weather was cold that day. There was a howling wind and so I started doing this triathlon very early in the morning.

3.8 kilometre swim. 180 kilometre bike ride. Then I started the marathon. 10 kilometres to go.

I heard the fat lady sing. And I just lost heart. I just couldn't keep going. My body was a wreck.

It was a freezing day. I'd eaten too much on the bike ride and so I'd slowed down in the run and I started to get hypothermia. I just couldn't keep on going. I probably could have walked the last 10 kilometres if I plucked up my courage but I'd lost heart.

[3 : 16] I'd travelled so far. I'd done so much but my heart wasn't in the finish line. I just could no longer see the finish line and so I gave up. There's an element in which all of us have been in those similar situations where we just lose heart.

Paul the Apostle does not lose heart. He does not give up. He is not discouraged. Despite the fact that he is beaten, whipped, shipwrecked, forsaken and imprisoned.

Despite the fact that he is ignored and rejected by many, despite the fact that he has sleepless nights, Paul does not give up. Have a look in verse 1 of today's passage that we're looking at.

Chapter 4, verse 1. It would be good for you to have your Bibles open at page 939, 2 Corinthians chapter 4. Paul says these words, after reflecting on chapter 3 and the glorious ministry that he is involved in, a more glorious ministry than Moses, a ministry that has been given to him, a ministry of the Spirit.

Verse 18, if you look there in chapter 3, and all of us with unveiled faces seeing the glory of the Lord as reflected in a mirror are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another for this comes from the Lord the Spirit.

[4 : 45] Paul reflects last week as we saw on this glorious ministry he is involved in and his conclusion after reflecting on that, he doesn't give up. Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.

God showed him mercy. He showed him mercy on the road to Damascus. Paul was a persecutor of the church, someone who wanted to try and stop the early church, but God in his mercy touched his life, met him through the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus in a blinding light.

And at that point, Paul was converted. He understood that the Messiah was truly Jesus and that he had a calling to the Gentiles.

Because of God's mercy, he does not give up. In the rest of this paragraph, Paul then goes on to give a summary of this ministry.

He gives a summary of all that he is involved in. He gives a picture of his apostolic integrity that he has. And in many ways, it picks up many of the themes that we have seen from the previous chapter.

[6 : 05] Many of the words are echoed in this section that we are about to look at. So, Paul starts in verse 2 by saying that his ministry is not a ministry of shameful practices.

In particular, his ministry is not that of cheap rhetorical tricks to win people's favour. But look there in verse 2. Paul will not play fast and loose to the Bible and the gospel truth.

He will not put a veil over people's faces. He will not try and trick people into the message. But he wants to speak with open and truth. He will not be afraid of it.

Paul has in his mind, I think, at this moment, the opponents who are in Corinthians, those false teachers who are going around, who are playing those cunning tricks, who are speaking with great words and great rhetoric and trying to win over favour.

But Paul says, no, I don't practise that. I don't need to practise that. You can imagine the Corinthians and these false opponents.

[7 : 26] Upon hearing these words in 2 Corinthians as the letter's been read out, you can imagine them just grumbling amongst each other. This Paul, he thinks he is so good. If he thinks his message is so powerful that he doesn't need to use cunning and trickery, then why isn't everyone converted by it?

Why is there so many who appear to be veiled from Paul's gospel? Paul's ministry is a veiled ministry. It's a restricted ministry.

He only wants to give it out to a few people. But Paul answers this charge in the next verse, in verses 3 and 4. Paul makes it very clear, it's not that his gospel is veiled, it's that people's minds are veiled.

Just like the people, the Jewish nation, their minds were veiled from the truth. Paul is saying that this message, this light that comes from God, is blinded to them because of the Satan and the desires of this world.

Satan is very cunning and using the age that people are in to blind them from the truth. He says, yes, you need to get involved in the things of this society.

[8 : 57] For the Corinthians, it was a culture of boasting, of having great material wealth, of self-importance. And so Satan uses that. People get trapped into this, wanting to boast about themselves and try and have great material possessions and that type of thing.

And Satan says, yeah, that's where it is. Hang on to those things. Satan blinds them. And they walk around stumbling in the dark. But Jesus says, Paul says, they're blinded from this light, the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

In verses 5 and 6, we see the reason why Satan veils this gospel, this message. Paul makes it clear that he doesn't preach himself, but he preaches Christ.

That's who he points to. Paul knows he's not the head man. He knows that he's not in charge of the organisation. He is simply a servant, an assistant. He is someone who points to the top man.

He's one of the Messiah's office staff. It's Paul's job to make him known, to keep out of the way of the light. You can see that in verses 5 and 6.

[10 : 19] For we do not proclaim ourselves, but we proclaim Christ as Lord and ourselves as slaves for Jesus' sake. Paul says, my message is Jesus.

That's who I proclaim. I don't proclaim myself. I'm not going to get in the road of it. I'm not the truth. I'm not the life. Jesus is. Look to him. But he also says there that he's slaves for the Corinthians.

That is, he is the Corinthian servant and he'll preach about that, that he serves them. And what is he serving with? The gospel, the message of Jesus.

In verse 6, we see there the reason why Paul actually proclaims this, this message of Jesus. It's because the light actually shone in his life first.

For it is the God who said, let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in the hearts to give the light of the knowledge and of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

[11:20] Just as God spoke, let there be light at the beginning of the world and God created light, God spoke into his life the light of the message of Jesus.

Paul here is talking about where he comes face to face with Jesus on the road to Damascus. It's there that he is blinded by the glory of God as it shines on the face of Jesus.

It's at that moment that God shines a light into Paul's heart, that he enables Paul to see through the darkness and to trust in this Jesus.

For Paul, it's his central job to preach this Jesus. He will talk about him and he will talk about what Christ has done for him.

This is indeed a glorious ministry, a great ministry and Paul doesn't lose heart because of that. But in verse 7, he says that while it is a glorious and great message, it's also found in a weak vessel.

[12:33] 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. Paul wants to make it very clear that this great message is found in jars of clay.

When I was a teenager and at university, I thought I was invincible, unbreakable.

You should have seen the rock climbing that I did. I put care aside and climbed some magnificent peaks. I thought that nothing could get me. I could get away from anything.

I could climb my way out of things. You give me a problem and I'll get out of it. I was invincible. But I've come to see that in reality, I'm a frail and weak human being and as I get older, I see more of those things just creeping in.

I see a few people smiling there as though I'm not that old but it's creeping in, don't you worry. I'm not quite as fast as I used to be, I'll let you know. I guess the place that I see it clearest is in the visiting that I do, in the people that I meet and in the newspaper that I see.

[13:54] People who struggle with frail and weak bodies. Eight people have died on the roads this weekend in Victoria just like that.

We are frail and weak. Talking to people, my friends, with cancer, dying with cancer of my age, frail and weak.

Paul knows that his body is frail and weak. You can imagine the Corinthians as Paul walks in, he's not an impressive figure to look at. You'd expect if he's a ministry of power and wealth and health, he would be a man with the latest robes and the latest donkey, three speed donkey.

He would be a man of great impressive wealth, not a man who is weak, a man who comes, who has been beaten and turfed out of cities.

Paul knows that he is a earthen vessel. A clay jar. It is disposable. It is fragile.

[15:08] It is easily broken. It can be put aside. But Paul uses this picture to contrast the great message that is inside. While Paul recognises that he is weak, the treasure that he holds is something that is awesome.

It is something that is glorious. It is something that is fantastic. Paul wants them to see this, that while he is weak on the outside, he has a ministry, he has something that is of great value.

In verses 8 and 9, Paul then gives some illustrations of how he is fragile. but he also points out as you look there, notice the way that he says that although he is fragile, he is not completely and utterly broken.

Look there in verse 8. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed.

Paul makes it clear that while he is weak in his body, he is not utterly destroyed. Why? Because of the God of comfort, the God who supports him.

[16:33] Appears in this list that Paul may be being stoic, that he is just trying to be brave in the face of, oh, I get beaten but look how good I am, I have survived all these things. Paul makes it very clear that it's from God that this ministry is able to keep on going.

In verses 10 to 12 Paul indicates what is the purpose of the hardship that he suffers and how there is a paradox, paradoxically it manifests the power of God that even in Paul's weakness it actually

points to God's power.

So, look there in verse 10, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be visible in our bodies 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.

Jesus, God's son, comes down to earth in weakness and dies upon a cross and the world looks at it and says it's foolish and that it's weak but in that moment is where God is powerful in dealing with our sin.

It's in the midst of weakness that God is great and Paul says in the midst of his weakness he points it's like his body is a medium for the message that actually when you look at Paul's suffering you are to see there that there is a link between him and Jesus that in the midst of that suffering God is made powerful.

[17 : 57] Not only is it in his suffering but also in his life. That is that when God comforts and helps Paul through these terrible times or even the times where he can't as we see later on in chapter 13 where he actually can't get rid of some of his suffering God enables him to bear up underneath the strain of it.

These point to the resurrection power of Jesus that just as God raised Jesus from the light to life so Paul points to the fact that God brings comfort pointing to the fact that there is this God who brings life.

Paul's life demonstrates the resurrection power in the gospel. In verse 12 Paul makes it very clear that the consequences of his suffering is for the sake of the Corinthians.

So death is at work in us but life in you. So as they look at Paul's weak frail bodies they see there the picture of the message of Christ and it brings life to them.

In verses 13 and 14 Paul utters his confidence in the resurrection from the dead. Here is another grounding that Paul gives for his confidence that he does not lose heart.

[19 : 15] He believes in the resurrection from the dead. The God who will raise people to life and this undergirds his preaching. Paul being a Jewish scholar would have known the Psalms and would have weaved in the Psalms in his prayers all the time.

He would have known the Psalms back to front. Paul would have known Psalm 116 and the way that Psalm 116 talks about the Psalmist being trapped and that death is all around him that he smells the bitter smell of the underworld coming up and trying to drag the Psalmist down.

But there in the midst of great despair the Psalmist is able to talk about this great Yahweh Israel's God who came to rescue him. Paul recognises the similarities in his life that in the midst of his despair there is a God who rescues him, a God who is the Father of Jesus.

And so the Psalmist says, because I believe I spoke and so Paul does the same because he knows the resurrection will happen he speaks also.

But just as the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture I believed and so I spoke we also believe and so we speak because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into his presence.

[20 : 49] Paul knows that the resurrection from the dead is a reality that it will happen and so he speaks about it he knows it and he speaks about it.

In verse 15 Paul brings it to conclusion and he says all these things are for your sake and not only for your sake but for the sake that God may be glorified that people may give thanks to God.

Yes, everything is for your sake so that grace as it extends to more and more people may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God. Paul is not interested in bringing glory to himself.

He is not interested in puffing himself up. He is interested in pointing to the God who is worthy of all glory and thanksgiving. So Paul does not lose heart.

We are to be a people who do not lose heart. We are to be a people who know that the light has shone in our lives, that in a world of darkness God speaks clearly through the message of Jesus.

[22 : 04] That while we are weak, we know that one day we will be raised to life, life eternal. We do not lose heart.

We need to be careful therefore of the message of Satan, the God of this age who speaks out to us, who speaks out that materialism is so important, that pluralism is so important, that self centredness is where it's at.

We need to ignore these lies and we need to focus on Jesus. We also need to be careful of those who claim to preach Christ but preach a health and wealth gospel, that you can have it all here and

now, that you can have all the wealth and all the health that you should have, a glorious time here and now.

I don't see that in Paul. You don't see a man who is of glorious health and glorious wealth. We need to be people of endurance who focus on our future glory.

If Jesus came back tomorrow, if he came back today, would we be people who would think, this is fantastic, this is all I've been hoping and waiting for, this is the moment, this is it?

[23 : 37] Or would you be like someone else and say, this is very inconvenient Jesus, I'm sorry, I've got a business deal to do, it's actually getting in the road of my plans to here and now.

We need to be people who hang on to our great hope, who trust in our Lord Jesus. We are people who do not lose heart.

Let us pray that God's spirit will indeed be working our lives and helping us not to lose heart but to continue focusing on our risen saviour.

Amen. Da hull ■i.